

Russell Cheney



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RUSSELL CHENEY, AT KITTERY, 1930

RUSSELL CHENEY

1881—1945

A Record of His Work

With Notes by F. O. Matthiessen



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RUSSELL CHENEY, the eleventh and youngest child of Knight Dexter Cheney and Ednah Dow Smith, was born at South Manchester, Connecticut, on October 16, 1881, and died at Kittery, Maine, on July 12, 1945.

The Cheney family, originally of Norman stock, had come to this country from England in 1635, and had located first at Rowley, Massachusetts. By the beginning of the eighteenth century they were settled as prosperous farmers near Hartford, and in 1831 Cheney's grandfather and three brothers founded their mill for the manufacture of silk. Two of the painter's great-uncles, Seth and John Cheney, were notable steel-engravers.

Cheney attended the Hartford High School, and followed his four brothers to Yale, where his vivid nature began to unfold and made him many solid and lasting friends. He graduated in 1904, with no special scholastic distinction, though he did a great deal of reading on his own, particularly of French history. He also nourished himself on Emerson, who prepared him to find, some years later, Whitman as his poet. While at college he spoke of being an architect, but he had already secretly resolved to be a painter. Long afterwards he mentioned shyly how one evening, while by himself in the old studio where his great-uncles had worked, he felt suddenly overcome by the beauty of a replica of the Venus de Milo and knelt in adolescent dedication at her knees. It was characteristic of him that in the midst of a gregarious family he kept his inner life almost entirely unspoken. But when he broached to his parents his desire to study art, he encountered no opposition from his father, and from his mother warm support.

He worked at the Art Students' League in New York for three years, and then for another three years in Paris at the Academie Julien, under Jean-Paul Laurens. He felt that he had an immense amount to learn, since he had not started seriously to work until he was twenty-three, an age at which most European painters would already have been practised in their craft. He realized later that having been a student so long, he also had much to unlearn. A wholly unselfconscious openness to new experience remained with him throughout his life, and kept him young in spirit to the end.

He was president of the Art Students' League in 1912, and began to paint in the summers with the group surrounding Charles H. Woodbury at Ogunquit, Maine. This book begins with his Paris Salon portrait in 1911 and repre-

sents all phases of his productive career. He painted in many different sections of this country, as well as abroad, and the recent facile opposition between "the American sceners" and "the expatriates" breaks down entirely in his case. He never thought of himself as anything but an American, but he wanted to master great painting wherever it was to be found. As a student he made equally absorbed copies of Manet's *Girl with a Parrot* and Copley's *Mrs. Seymour Fort*. Like many other Americans he loved Paris, but he did not find a strong taste for Racine incompatible with a lifelong devotion to Thoreau's *Walden*.

Cheney's work was exhibited extensively throughout the country, as well as at the Babcock, Montross, and Ferargil galleries in New York. At the time of his death he was represented in museums at San Francisco, Hartford, Newark, Boston, Portland, Santa Fe, and Yale. He willed his remaining canvases and panels, about two hundred altogether, to me as the friend most closely in touch with his work. My aim in making this book of reproductions, in connection with a memorial exhibition, is to let his pictures speak for themselves, as far as they can in black and white. I have selected the pictures he regarded as the best from all stages of his development. I have made no attempt to estimate his achievement, since I can still hear his chuckle as he read: "Writers on art as a rule know little of the actual problems of painting, and the best they can do is to deceive a public that knows less." That is not to say that he failed to respect a real expert like Berenson or Roger Fry.

Fortunately Cheney himself furnished the best possible kind of commentary on his work, in letters to friends, especially to Phelps Putnam and to me. From a mass of material I have selected primarily the passages bearing upon the canvases reproduced. To an exceptionally uninhibited degree Cheney wrote as he talked to his intimates. His hand-writing was very rapid, "hen-tracks on eternity," as he once called it, and corresponded both to his lively mind and to his rich vibrant Connecticut voice. It gave permanence to the most incisive and revelatory observations on the nature of art that it has been my privilege to hear.

F. O. MATTHIESSEN

Kittery, Maine
July, 1946.

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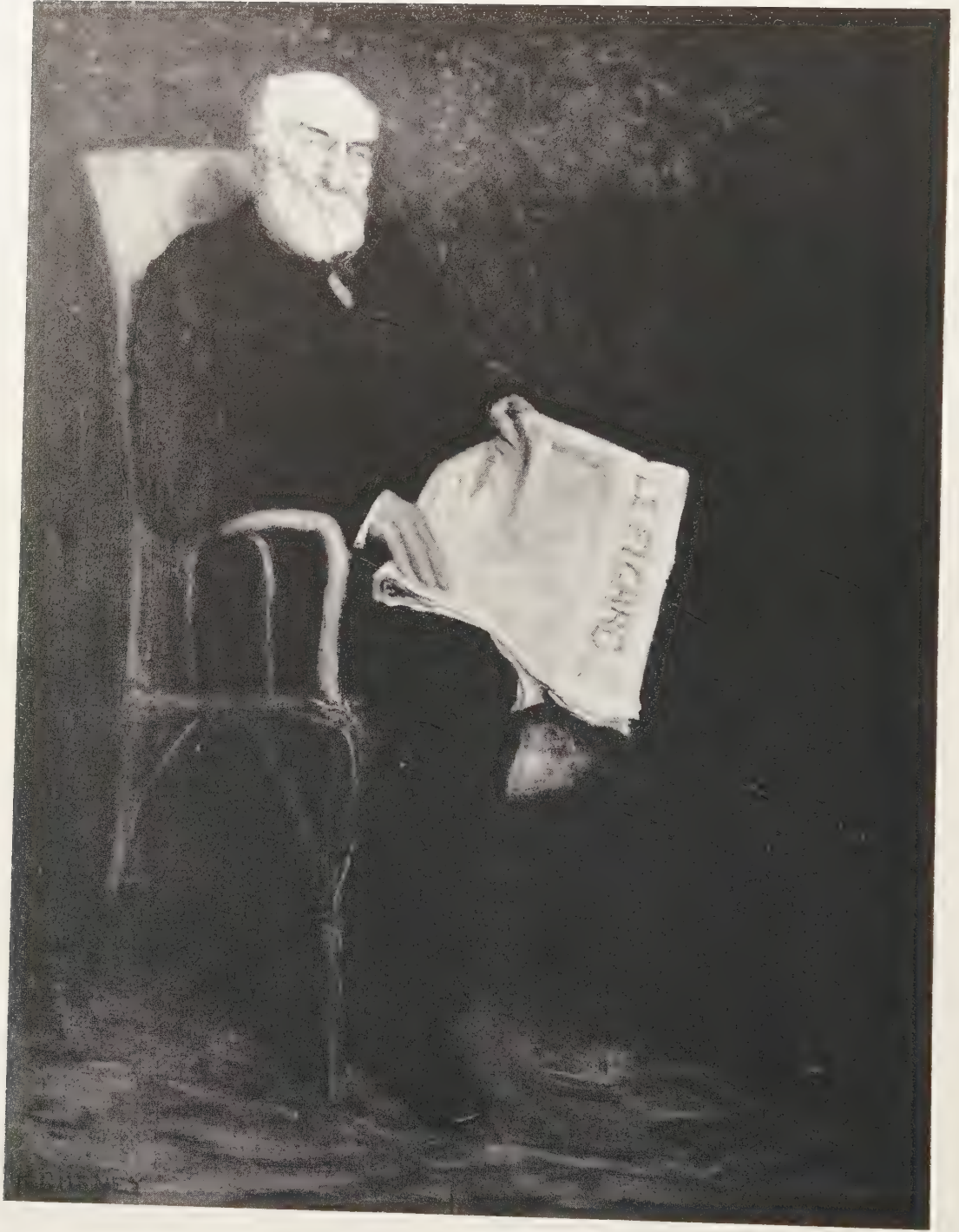


THE pictorial record of Cheney's career may begin with two glimpses of classes at the Art Students' League, fine period pieces in themselves. In one of them Cheney (at the extreme right) is watching Kenyon Cox draw from a Greek torso. In the other, Cheney (in the rear and towards the right, with his chin cupped in his hand) follows with characteristic intensity William M. Chase's exhibition of rapid brush-work. Many of Cheney's early canvases reveal his response to Chase's infectious bravura, but he came to hold far more



lasting respect for the solider teaching methods of Cox and Bridgman.

He developed very slowly, and five years after his Paris Salon portrait there were only a few canvases that he would have cared to save. Two of these, *Eucalyptus Trees*, painted near his sister's home at Santa Barbara, and *Woodstock*, where he had a studio in the summer of 1916, show respectively the two chief gifts with which he started. He could catch a swift and delicate impression. He also had a flair for bold flat decorative design.



PROFESSOR CANOLLE, 1911



EUCALYPTUS TREES, 1916



WOODSTOCK, 1916



THIS photograph of the artist in his South Manchester studio, which he had made over from a barn, fills out the account of where he had arrived by 1916. The two large canvases flanking him to right and left above are again from New England and California. The smaller landscape below is the first of many impressions of the Sewall House at York, Maine. He described the picture directly over his head in a letter to Henry Varnum Poor, whom he had gotten to know in Paris. Cheney wrote from his family's summer home at York Harbor, in the summer of 1915: "Well, I've been having a mighty interesting time getting back here after two years and seeing the place so differently after that time and especially taking some stuff over to Woodbury to have him look it over. I had a whole morning there with him and am full of new ideas from it. In a general way he finds me able to put down now what I have before me—form, drawing, and color—and then, granting that, he goes on to show how all of them don't make a picture at all. You know what I mean. He is great in not imposing his own way on you, but looking at things on your own ground. The darn cuss ended up by giving me a canvas he had there just for fun—a 36 x 40 of rocks with some waves bilging around that suck back and pile in at the same time. . .

"All my stuff looks rot to me, Henry, all of a sudden. Partly Woodbury, but I saw it before too. Not discouraging, on the contrary, makes me ache to

get at it and do some real ones. Lord, I suppose we'll go on starting over again all our lives. I hope so—darn it. Henry, I believe both of us will. Let's go to it."

A year later he was writing to a new Yale friend, the poet Phelps Putnam, in a more assured vein: "Have been having a real day of it, one of the satisfactory, really working up to the limit ones that you seem to be able to accomplish very seldom. Stupid enough subject in a way—a lot of still life things I worked into a good arrangement, and then it clicked into place in my head the way it has (like getting the focus just right in a camera) and the things come to life with fine balanced lines and planes and color relations you never saw till you started. The idea in your head, i.e. the important thing, is as fine and living as any portrait or other subject. . . . When you get going like that, your heart is just singing inside you and everything is good. Even yourself."

But just at this point Cheney, still very slight in build, broke down with tuberculosis, which had cost the lives of a sister and a brother. He had to spend nearly two years in bed at Colorado Springs, but he came to regard this enforced idleness as one of the most fortunate things that ever happened to him. Looking out at Pike's Peak and meditating on how he wanted to paint, he finally recovered, as he said, from having been a student too long. He assimilated Cézanne. His masters during his Paris days had stopped short with the impressionists, but now Cheney, spending day after day over a book of reproductions, learned far more than he had ever known about mass and structure. He also faced himself with relentless honesty, determined to purge himself for action: "Can I get it down on canvas, myself? One thing after another is driving me to that life for my Ideal. . . . I'm not a strong man, at least I was not a strong one, I was a weak one when I started, and this damn desire to reach that Ideal has been after one thing after another. It is stronger than an unwilling body and a weak will and a sloppy brain. It seems outside of me, and when I'm working often—always when it's good work—it hasn't been reason, it's been pure instinct that did it.

"My small person enjoys the work of routine. I could stay along in classes happily, having work laid out to do, a fairly good craftsman-dilettante, and all that has nothing to do with this outside force—you called it 'unknown'—



Cheney, by Henry Poor

which takes you right off your feet. I know this, that can't do the trick for you alone. You've got to be so trained, so much master of material that work is automatic when you get down to business. Compared to the small work I have done, this is big talk. . . I know what it is I've done, but I also know what I tried for and I see my knowledge, though still inadequate, far in advance of what it was say a year ago. You grow or you shrink, and I'm growing. I know it. . .

"You surely understand that I am utterly humble in these claims I make . . . of great desire which is dragging a weak will to a certain higher achievement. It's not for myself one iota, it's to do clean work. I don't know where it leads or why I do it really. I must do it, that's all, and slowly I'm trying to rid myself of the clogs that keep me down. They are bitterly close to my flesh. . . I'm not the master yet. I've done nothing yet in Art. Who shall know the struggle going on inside just an ordinary good enough sort like me to be something, clear of shackles, to transfigure his body into an instrument of Art."

Putnam, who had fallen sick with asthma, joined Cheney in Colorado, and was an immense stimulus to his mind. They discovered together the new writing that was just appearing, the first volumes of Frost and Eliot, the stories of Sherwood Anderson, and Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, which remained one of Cheney's favorite books. As he began to be well, Henry Poor came for a visit, and did a portrait of him with the somber expression he often revealed in repose.

When he was able to paint again, Cheney started where he had left off in *Woodstock*, and, in *Garden of the Gods*, carried even farther his fascination with flat decorative pattern. In *Ute Pass*, one of a series of vigorous landscapes, he produced the first of his canvases to be acquired by a museum, the Palace of Fine Arts in San Francisco.

Back in Connecticut in 1919-20, he turned to some interiors, one of the Cheney Homestead, another of the end of his studio, including the grandfather clock that had been made by Russell and Asahel Cheney in the eighteenth century, and extending out through the door to the green trellis of his garden. In *Red Echo Farm*, he brought to the New England scene the same free energetic approach that he had made to Colorado, and topped it with what Putnam called one of his "Jehovah skies." He continued to use this swift impressionistic method a couple of years later in the dark-keyed landscapes of *Skungimaug Brook* and *Haling's Hill*, near South Manchester. The first of these was presented to the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford by two of Cheney's brothers, though he later came to wish that he had been represented there by some more mature work. Seeing this canvas after a lapse of years, he wrote: "I've just been over to the Museum to see a new Whistler they bought and I got near knocked flat with my big canvas hanging there—same room as Copley

and Reynolds—and maybe it doesn't look incomplete and modern and boyish in its enthusiasm and lack of subtlety or 'finish.' It's alive and kicking, which most . . . are not, but gosh I'm ashamed way down inside. I jumped the pistol. I thought I was better than I was."

It was characteristic of him throughout life to be excited over the work at hand, and dissatisfied with it in retrospect. He often contemplated himself with self-mockery bordering on disgust. He wrote Putnam about returning again to an old sketch of his mother, to whom he had been devoted and who had died shortly before he had gotten sick: "I changed its proportions and started drawing in the head some. As a suggestion I like it now. It seems very like her . . . Thing is to see if I can get it beyond the suggestion to the fact. Thing is to see whether Cheney can get beyond suggestion to the goods—what? . . . For a few minutes today I was really creating—that canvas of Mother and I were alive, right opposite, and I didn't say should I or should I not change this? Just did it. It did itself. And I got to her too, and got set straight in several false values I'd let creep in lately. Those penetrating eyes look right through to truth.

"Oh what did I ever do to get this bug of wanting to live high and fine? Why not easy like the rest? Damn it, you've passed me on some irony . . . Some days like these I get the vision of the enchanted places of myself. I must go out, but art is all alone, and God damn, pity me, I ain't made that way. It's nailing me to a cross and hear me whimper at the first nail, and 38 is so late to be looking for the first nail, and W. J. Bryan laughs and pokes a sponge wet with grape-juice."

By the time he felt himself ready for his first New York exhibitions in 1921 and 1922, he had added many canvases from a long summer in France, of which his impression of *Chartres* was the freshest product, and a series of flower pieces. Cheney always had a special passion for flowers, and a very green thumb as a gardener. In *Mimosa* he caught the floating airiness of the yellow blossoms. In *Zinnias* he demonstrated what he had learned from Chase in the brilliant handling of the vermilion flowers and jet-black ground as well as of the vase and the grotesque Chinese figurines. In *Vitrine*, again in Santa Barbara, he treated what was to become a favorite motif, flowers against a window, combining thereby still life with landscape.



GARDEN OF THE GODS, 1918



UTE PASS, 1918



THE STUDIO, 1919

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NEW ENGLAND INTERIOR, 1920



RED ECHO FARM, TOPSHAM, VERMONT, 1920



CHARTRES, 1921



MIMOSA, 1921



VITRINE, 1921



ZINNIAS, 1921



SKUNGIMAUG BROOK—MORNING, 1922



HALING'S HILL—WINTER, 1922



EN PROVENCE, 1924



Cheney, standing against his Cassis subject

THE year 1923-4 Cheney considered as the turning point in arriving at his mature style. He went for the winter to Southern France with Phelps and Ruth Putnam, and settled at Cassis, on the coast near Marseilles. The older American impressionist, Walter Griffin, was also painting there, and took a great interest in Cheney's work. Griffin's steady concern with a high-keyed palette and Cheney's growing desire to utilize what he had learned from Cézanne produced, in his chief canvas of that winter, *En Provence*, his first fusion of impressionistic handling of light with post-impressionistic solidity of form and weight of modelling. When Cheney was back in Cassis by himself the following winter, he wrote to Putnam how much the discussions with Griffin had meant to him: "The richness of organic form—sculptured filling of the whole space, inevitable—Walt didn't show just this, he hasn't got it, but he showed the way to it through 'values.' I had been arabesque—a flat design (*The Garden of the Gods*). Then in opposition to the flat quality of a decorative design (good, say, in *Chinese Lilies*), I started to cut in with those damn blue black shadows, hunting weight and form. Take *Valyermo*—the California mountain and peach tree one—the mountain is solid and good, but its false overemphasis of values takes it out of organic place with the whole canvas. Walt showed me you can't go black. That produced the flash which showed form. A close instinctive *hunt* for values which stay on the surface, never break through as those blacks did, and by that alone give weight—the rich harmonious sense of a thing whole in itself. Walt's too occupied with

jewelled light. Canvas OK from that point of view, but I need what seems bigger to me—form and weight. He showed me the sunlight, and when I applied that to the form I had been searching, why hell, they just went for each other. They flamed together into a new ‘manner,’ as you will call it biographically, a new vision as I call it sitting here at 3:30, the first put-put boats just starting off for *la pêche* and Mr. Cheney going back to bed.

“Is that what happened to me? It is directly pictorial expression of the same change in my nature during the last ten years. I am that much richer and fuller, but I’d gotten way ahead of my painting in personality. Walt’s hint and the happy circumstance of being with you here brought me up with a bang. I am hitting it again here.”

He had gone home in the spring of 1924, with the confidence that he now saw his way ahead, and that all he had to do was to settle down in Connecticut and paint. But it did not work out that way. He felt himself out of touch with his immediate surroundings, and insulated there from his deeper interests. He was very fond of his family, of his sisters and brothers and countless cousins. But he had increasingly to face the fact that it was hard for him to produce when in their midst. He hated to admit this, since he also loved his studio and the Connecticut countryside. But this summer he was overcome with lethargy and a black cynicism about his work. When Putnam and a younger Yale poet, Max Foster, came to visit, they blasted him out of that mood and out of Manchester. Griffin had spoken to him of Venice as a magnificent place to work, and Cheney, greatly exhilarated by his friends’ vivid belief in him, suddenly found himself on his way there. I was studying at Oxford that year, and Cheney and I happened to sail on the same boat. We had known each other previously through various Yale connections, and by the end of the voyage we too began to be intimate friends. We both started at this time to set down our thoughts in long journal-letters, so from this point forward for several years, between Cheney’s letters to Putnam and to me, his own commentary on his work becomes wonderfully full.

Hotel Danieli, Venice, Monday night, September 29, 1924. A long day behind me. I’ve really located—marked down—completed—an idea for a picture. Complicated as hell—just what I had in the back of my head before I got here. Ordered a canvas an odd size—one meter square—which won’t be done till Thursday, damn ’em, but I can wait—must wait, and when you once have the real hunch why maybe it’s better to wait a while and let it simmer. Makes me laugh, the audacity of my trying to draw it at all...but I see the marvellous shimmer of light over the building, the turquoise sky, the rose tinged sunlight over the domes and upper towers. The cool shadow below swallowing

the vulgarity of forms. A vision of Kubla Khan. I think I can simplify the enormous mass of detail to hold my vision—can only try.

October 2. I got started and well started with the big canvas this afternoon—the San Marco one. Spent all day drawing it in and will probably take another day before I can start to paint. . . Now I've placed it all and arranged the shadow business, the longer I stick to detail drawing the easier the paint end will roll off when I let go. It looks pretty damn good to me on the big easel, balances up fine, and a great chance for a dancing turquoise sky with the sun-lit domes melting into it.

October 5. I landed quite a wallop out of the big canvas yesterday. Finished the drawing end of it at home in the morning with a postcard! With all the placing done it is merely a routine labor. Then for two hours while the sun broke through after lunch I sailed in. It's right there your letter. . . fits in the idea of creative impulse. To hang onto it through those three days of work and when you start color, start as though you had just begun. This damn picture is purely imaginary. Its frame is the domed Byzantine church. Its essence is the shifting iridescent light, which isn't there at all if the truth were told, only suggested to me by the crowded domes bathed with sky.

I only painted on one little section of it in that short time, but enough to see my way. Wish you could see it as it stands. Couldn't have a better example of canvas coming to life. Of course the drawing must have life—after all it's the skeleton—but the palpitating throbbing light is the life and soul of it. You see here I am talking not of achievement but of the idea in my head.

Same afternoon. I am lying on the bed writing. Out the window the sunset colors have died down a pale mauve and faun. A sailing ship has drifted by, dim colored sails with burnt orange designs painted on them. A little rift of turquoise sky. . . Have a vague impression from what I wrote this morning one would think I considered myself a pretty good painter. Fact is I am humble as hell, but only because I think I've got it—humble before real work. I don't think I'm a good painter. I only know I'm not a dead one.

October 8. All this morning just waiting for one o'clock to get at *San Marco*. Oh I wasn't forgetting it, just waiting—and I'll do the same tomorrow. I nailed it, feller. I put in about three hours *good work*—things just jumping along. The whole canvas begins to seem alive, not just that patch of domes and sky. Also I begin to appreciate what a hell of a job it will be to really do it, but I've got a strength for it I never had. I'm layin' for it.

October 11. *San Marco* going *great*, especially today. Lots more color in it all of a sudden.

October 13. *San Marco* took a good step today and I might finish tomorrow. It is luminous and interesting. I don't know how good it is because I am too much in it.



SAN MARCO, 1924

October 15. I am near being pleased with *San Marco*. Worked on it indoors all day, just singing happy anyhow with a new subject landed.

October 20. Raining like hell...it does raise Cain with getting on with the new canvas I laid out of Santa Maria della Salute. I have half a mind to go ahead and paint it out of my head, have such a definite idea about a late sunset one I would probably paint with my eyes turned in anyhow, looking at the subject occasionally as a concession to the crowd of spectators. Many times I've gone out to a subject and found it not like my impression and by gosh go ahead and stand there and paint the impression which is the significant thing, using the actual subject only for suggestion on drawing, etc.

I sure look forward to the day you turn up in my studio at home and we can go back through the different phases I've blundered through trying to arrive at myself. Well at Cassis in April I thought I had arrived and all I had to do was go back home and settle in for good. Just live there and paint quietly the rest of my life, and...what a mess I made of it. How the devil inside me raised the devil with the best laid plans and I did nothing—just nothing at all for six months. Well, Putnam and Foster pried me out of that slough, and...it begins to look as though I might be whole again. I'm not yet, don't think I am, but I want to be and then I did not want to be—and there is a difference.

October 27. Great painting is pure emotional expression in just the same way as great poetry and music is, and it should affect us so. Ourselves should vibrate to the same emotion he put in—so what is Baedeker to us who are at the heart of life itself? With Botticelli, with Michaelangelo, with Shakespeare or Whitman by God we are with our peers. Proud as Lucifer if you want to say so. Now this philandering and playing on the outskirts of life is over, and at the heart of life you got to work like hell, and work and work and prove yourself... That's what Put said, "Work, you bastard, work!" Well, I don't need to tell you to work, but use your bean when you do work. Got to be always outside watching yourself work and kidding yourself out of everything not essentially yourself, borrowed thought. I'm talking to myself and you—that's everybody's problem.

October 29. I am all set to draw in my Colleone statue picture. Have the perfect frame for it already to paint right in, something I always like to do if possible. A heavy dull black and gold antique one—it's perfect, and I am going to be very mechanical and professional as long as the Lord lets me on it. Square off canvas and photo! and just draw and draw till I'm sure the elaborate facade of the church and pedestal of the monument are accurate. Then go over there and let loose on color without having to consider the drawing.

November 4. My frame for *San Marco* came and by God how it dresses it up. It sends it flying right to the first rank of anything I ever did. No question at all that and *Colleone* have justified my being here, if the growth of my spirit itself did not fill the bill.



COLLEONE, 1924

November 9. *San Marco* is in front of me just about done . . . and *Colleone* on the floor a bit undecided yet. *He* is done, done up brown, the horse and the top of the monument are OK, but there is a dingy look to the church facade I got to clean up and I play with the idea of putting a lot of people moving round. A blackish tone of sombre color suggests the character of the main figure all right. My next job is to finish up the big sunrise one of the Salute. I think I've got to fake it here in the room. The morning today when I opened my eyes enough to see was sharp and clear-cut and autumnal, not at all the misty drifting poetical idea I was after. After I've had coffee and dressed I'll get after it right here, and put in the afternoon on the odd jobs of *Colleone*.

At the time of his next New York exhibition, the following spring. A lot of amusing things came up in the gallery. A man from Newark—hipped on the Colleone statue—made a special trip to Venice to see it last year—carries photos always in his pocket to look at between whiles—came in from Jersey to see the canvas described by various papers Sunday—looking for trouble but mollified by the fact that my drawing checked *absolutely* with his photo. (I made the drawing from the same photo, but God preserve us do you suppose I told him so? I did not tell him so.) He is enraptured—he is lyric—he has only one passion in life and that is Colleone. He told Babcock the Newark Museum must own the picture because in the main square of Newark stands a magnificent replica of the Colleone in bronze and marble, and this would give her citizens an adequate idea of its setting. . . . God, my knees shook as he started comparing, accusing thunder incipient in his eye. But I made the grade—I *had drawn*—thanks be!

HE saw Italian painting for the first time this fall, and quickly discovered that “Florence is the home of my spirit rather than Venice.” He had long looked forward to walking into the Uffizi and seeing Botticelli’s *Venus*. “Well, I strolled down unconcerned-like, cashed in my stick, and through the turnstile, and by God first thing you know there I was dumped down in the chair in front of Herself, and she is as pure and serene and beautiful as I ever imagined she was. Bar none it is the greatest stimulant to do *real* work I know. Nothing is dodged, it is perfect—beautiful and by/beyond technique, the conception, the poetry is that of a great artist. Thank God there is such beauty in the world. It’s a haven for plagued and bothered human frailty, fills the same place for me that Christ must fill for others. Abstract Beauty or human (divine) love and pity.”

Both Giotto and Piero della Francesca soon became immensely important new discoveries for him. “Spent the afternoon yesterday seeing Botticelli again to check up with the others. He’s a fragile, graceful, lyric figure com-



PONTE VECCHIO, 1924

pared to both of them. Giotto is the greatest mind and nature. There's a sweep and decision to what he does, and strong emotion. A beautiful classic richness and fullness to Piero. Well, isn't it as great an achievement to reach the perfect wire-drawn grace of Botticelli as the firm rich modelling of the other?"

Hotel Grande Bretagna, Florence, November 30, 1924. How's things? Pretty good I hear. Foster writes of an Hegira to Concord—not that flood-spanning shrine of American literature in whose clean icy water I have longed to duck your soiled soul—but Concord, N. H., Concord New Hegira, to go bowling along down the ages as where Putnam completed his first Book. Not to Cassis was given that honor but to Concord. Lord of my Soul, go to it. I pat your feet.

And me...didn't I get up between 1:45 and 2:30 and shift $\frac{1}{8}$ inch the line of my *Ponte Vecchio* left arch, and wasn't it better?...and then didn't I put out the light and make a drawing of the houses with black patches of roof, houses a dull glowing burnt Siena tone, fluorescent, darts of green shot through it. A cold blue sky set and tricked out with stars, and the water green, deeper in value, sharp wiggly edge of the black roofs reflected...

The canvas is OK so far. Granted a gray sky tomorrow and a certain amount of nerve on the part of Mr. Cheney and he may pull off in paint what he seems to have suggested—an echo of the Primitives whose ghosts (whose ghosts?) writhe as they watch the daubers smear their Etruscan hills.

December 2. Well yes, I guess I pretty near got it. Not so slick and professional-like as I would desire. Stumbling, but stumbling in a new manner all right, bespeaking a desire to be accurate as well as smart, to paint, not merely indicate...

I know how you hate petty self-indulgence, how after a couple of solid days work and it comes on to rain and hail and sleet your serene way is not affected. You feel low and you don't care. You write. Pegasus flies: 9:30—12:15, 2:45—7:19. You remember George Sand at the Danieli finishing *Romola* at 2:13 A.M. and starting *Adam Bede* at 2:15. Well, I might as well own up. I'm not that way. I was low and would be better, painted spasmodically till 12:00. Loathed it. Hat, stick, burberry—a corner table at Donay's with a frosted cocktail. Lowered lashes before the beauties of Italian nobility—just a rapid fringed peek now and then. Well, that's not so bad, but I know how you hate to see a man—you who are such a man's man—squander his substance and weaken his fibre in self-indulgence. I'll out with it all—a nice table in the corner, swift Italian service, little dish of those stuffed spaghetti-cousin raviolis, sprinkled with brown sauce and chicken-liver chopped, a partridge nestled into rice and gravy, old chianti, a surprising chocolate thing copied from my neighbors, black steaming coffee. Sleek recovery from malaise. A charitable eye on *Ponte Vecchio*. Perhaps I didn't ruin it after all.

AFTER a Christmas trip through the Italian hill towns and as far south as Taormina, he settled in Cassis again for the winter. "I am sure something has clarified, settled in me. A knowledge of what I want out of a canvas which I was hitting sometimes before this last 'time off' with you but which had to be more definite to save wasting spurts on things which wouldn't pan out what I wanted. Produce more by producing less is the answer, and think and brood over them till they are rich and satisfying as well as real."

January 31, 1925. It was just the day I wanted. Cap Canaille dim blue but the quivering quality of its actual red rock making it shimmer and dance. The almond blossoms just showing against it. I fussed and fussed a couple of hours before I actually established just what I wanted to do . . . Got it settled finally and sailed in with the drawing really about done in a tentative way, just needing to be bossed around by some feller with a mind of his own. The curious rhythmic quality of those little slender trees. If I wasn't cursed with a funny bone, I'd call the canvas the Spring Dance of Dryads. If anything ever danced, those slim slips are dancing round the tall one. And the fresh blossoms and green grass and shimmering sea below. Just for fun tonight I've laid in Daphnis and Damoetas naked in the cool air, one leaning against a tree, the other stretched on the turf with his pipes. But I won't leave them, I suppose. After all, the red tiled adobe and the trim almonds and olives are France and not Sicily. One of these days I'll cut loose and paint what I want—*when I know something about painting* . . .

The rhythm of those trees . . . and the *fun* of recognizing it and then deciding this way or that way to capture it on the canvas, and not just the pattern design of it but the other way—to feel them springing from the ground, swaying from the roots way below ground. Each *behind* the others, and behind them the almonds, and behind that Canaille, and behind that the sky. Damn I think I've come near it, and more than that—just with charcoal—have some of the quality of cool color and airiness I want.

Well I was leisurely as all get out—would lay off and wander round looking at other groups of trees and pick a sprig of thyme and pinch it between my fingers . . . When "it goes" you can do anything you please and you can't stop it. The less you work the better because you think . . .

It came lunch time and I cursed I hadn't brought some up and meekly went down and got it, and over to the Café and sat over a coffee for half an hour, and then felt all slick and ready for another fall out of it. Climbed back and without very much work but a lot of mulling around made some big improvements. So now everything is set to start out with paint early. I'm going to take lunch along so I can stay out by myself and be happy instead of cooped with the British.

February 1. Of course I was due for a fall after being so doggone happy and idyllic all yesterday. There was a suspicious little breeze on as I climbed the hill toward my pine trees. It breezed and breezed till I had to tie the easel and canvas to a tree. It changed the whole quality of color I wanted to a sharp clear sort of thing and I didn't have sense to quit and go home. Had lunch all done up and with me and had planned such a slick day, I couldn't make up my mind I wasn't having one till about 12 I suddenly gave out. Found the nervous strain of holding out against the wind and trying to force what I wanted instead of taking it calmly as I could have yesterday, had just about done me in. Laid my canvas down with some rocks on each corner and crawled in on the lea side of some bushes and had a slick little meal—cold meat, bread and cheese, vin blanc, nuts and raisins. Well, I tried to go on after but I was all in, and by now the wind damn near a hurricane. I let it blow me home . . . Flopped on the bed to sleep, but I was nervous and jumpy and miserably lonely. I got out and around by the beach under the castle hill where I found a good sheltered spot in the sun . . . and lay there watching the waves pile in an hour or so. That was good. Came home and lit a good fire and made tea, sort of cussing myself for not being able to organize myself for being alone. Hell a feller is no good if he can't control and organize a life of ideas for himself. Then the Giotto book came along, and I dug into that for a good hour. They have never seemed so rich to me. God I enjoyed it . . . The nerves are over and I'm on my feet again. After all the canvas is not so damn rotten. Its color is monotonous because I was making that up, but the canvas is covered (a 29 x 36), it has light, and the trees stand up. Maybe to begin flat and work up rather than strong and down may be a good experiment.

Am trying to figure out where, if at all, the new appreciation and knowledge I have, since this last fall and winter, of paint and fresco will show up. I sort of feel there is some of it in this thing I blundered through this morning. It is big and simple whereas the drawing last night was finicky and over-detailed. Hell, Daphnis and Chloe got swept out fast enough in that high north wind. Joke if it was good and that was the reason I was so doggone tired, but I don't believe that yet. Tell you later.

Marie Louise raps and says dinner is ready with those dreadful dreadful stuffed shirts. My gracious I haven't even had a drink. Better repair that right now and go down and face absolute boredom for 25 minutes. Here goes. "Good evening ladies—damn your ugly faces!" ***** Well, it wasn't so bad. I keep my mouth consistently closed except to introduce food and occasionally eject undesirable food, and time does pass you know.

February 2. I was out early up the hill. It foreboded another cold blowy day, but by the time I got to bed last night I was pretty damn well stirred up over this new canvas. It looked good. I had it up over the sideboard and the light



BEAU MATIN, 1925

shaded to light it for me as I sat up warm in bed, and I just doped along there an hour or so after I came in. . . and I made up my mind it was *good* and almost done, if I had the guts to keep my hands off and do the striking things that must be done. . . and not do anything else. Well, either I did it and it's the best canvas yet. . . or I am gone bad in judgment and let things by too easy. If it's good, it's by simplicity, the very quality I was good by three years ago, with the added truth and lack of forced values I have learned the last year. . . It looks good to me. It looks vibrant with light and energy and direct simplicity. Color nothing much, but I think it goes the way it is. If I monkey and try to put more in, I destroy the fact a big 29 x 36 is adequately painted with extreme simplicity of means. I hope the hell I'm not kidding myself. The morning was good. Wind died down and I was able to be quiet and sit off for 20 minutes at a time, doping along, and then go up and do one small thing right. It was just that—perhaps a dozen spots definitely wrong, and those fixed why for God's sake let it alone, Mr. Cheney.

February 3. I've had a rotten day to make up for the last three fine ones. Scraped off the new canvas finally tonight and it may serve for something else. I know the tree one is good and I found the title for it: *Be'u Matin*, Provençal for a gay happy morning. Well, I'm not gay or happy. I'm just plain tired and I'm going to crawl into bed as soon as I go out and mail this.

February 5. Up the hill to the pine tree place where I did a small one [*Bouquet d'Arbres*]. I guess it's the most agreeable one yet. A group with the sun across the knoll. It was great up there, so quiet with the hot sun on the pines.

February 21. Foster's remark, "Now is the appointed season for masterpieces," has just pointed the sense within me that I'm set to do something of permanent value. . . I don't say or think I am doing masterpieces because I begin to think I play a rather fragile reed— but take this new one, it is packed right to the edge with opportunity. . . Anyhow I have the joy of feeling *glad* a thing is not done because I love *doing it*. I love the work for itself and two years ago I loved it for the excitement of those couple of hours and then went flat—my tongue in my cheek 9/10 of the time. . .

This thing of work with nothing else to call on you, I wonder—they say you can cut away and do just that all your life. Certainly each day the problem emerges just that much clearer. What problem? Why what you want to do. Of all the paths which will you choose? I know this. These new things reflect a new vision. . . I do not attain it always but I have seen it.

February 26. I am sitting leaning against the old tower just where we sat a minute the day we climbed up here. After days of wind and rain it has cleared. The sun is bright and hot, but veiled with a touch of sea mist that keeps Canaille dim lavender. The flat floor of the sea is all diamonds and still rolls in quite a bit. The crash of white and roll-back of the beach pebbles reaches



BOUQUET D'ARBRES, 1925

here but from a distance, as though actual things were not actual. The air is sweet with thyme, and there are funny twittery little birds around. Mr. Cheney is very tranquil—somewhat like a cow chewing a cud, large eyed in a nice green pasture. There come days when it's wicked to work. After all, painting may be merely the result of discontent... of unhappiness of unfulfillment of life and love. If you were always as I am this minute, you wouldn't paint, you'd just live. It is probably fortunate that you are complete only a couple of days a year at most.

On the boat back to America, late in March. Now I feel this last winter's work as unsatisfactory because not complete, too much suggestion. It isn't enough. It's got to be *done*, got to be planned and done. A conception of style held to and held to and held to till it's there forever. Do Chartres and Giotto and the Sistine ceiling come to us as amusement only or do they change your nature, give you vision that nothing is good enough unless it's supreme? Am I to be fooled by sticking up a lot of incomplete daubs in a gallery to be flattered by women into thinking they're good? I am not. I know they're nothing—dead leaves drifting still in the air a moment before they settle. But me—God, feller, how I feel this last year has enriched and deepened me... To have really deeply felt Giotto and stood there before the windows at Chartres... and to have seen the new vision of Beauty, to know that to love and to create are the same. I was a silly emotional kid that clung to the knees of that great Venus in offering himself to it, but I was wiser than I knew. But oh gosh how slow it is, the stripping off the vulgar easy indulgent bourgeois self and growing—one new vision succeeding the last only after years of effort, of sticking to it some way or other, of blind faith in yourself that some day you may purge yourself sufficiently to see undazzled and make beauty your own. No that's not it, not make it your own but let it have a new expression through you.

From New York, in April, just before the exhibition there of his last two years' work. Well, about the show. It is tomorrow by jinks, and by jinks and by jiminy it looks pretty damn swell. We hung last night after hours. First cleaned out all the truck has cumbered the land these last two weeks. The rooms opened up spacious and airy. You could breathe with all those dreary failures gone, and then from the cellar I handed up mine through a trap to James the Coon and Put. They put them where I said and when I came up... I caught my breath. The spacious airiness *was not gone*. One canvas in each space. The folds of white material showing a tinge of lavenderish faun color through the dignity of the simple severe hanging. Seemed really fine. Individually I still see the defects and weak spots. As a whole... I have made such a stride I cannot believe these immature looking things we have been bandying round the floor, perched here and there, could fuse into the spacious whole where your breath comes freely. God I want to work and work and work. I see my road so clearly.



CAUTEREGE-EN-CAUX, 1925

South Manchester, Connecticut, April 8. It's good to be home and quiet. Came up this morning and all afternoon was round the studio clearing up, getting out my various Chinese lares and penates. The tall white porcelain Kwanyin, Goddess of Mercy, for her place on my desk. The Siamese Buddha, slim boyish figure, the side face an elusive half smile, the front cruel and inhuman. One beautiful gray green piece of Sung pottery and some bronze vases of various shapes. Gosh how I love getting them out and placing them and rubbing 'em up to bring out the full patine. I love handling them and never tire of them or take less satisfaction in the perfection of their shapes and finish. . .

All the way up on the train I sat quietly dreaming along, happy in the fresh green landscape, the willows really out, the maple blossoms showing red and yellow. . . I think some of painting an interior of the Homestead along the line of that one we saw of Le Sidaner's in the Luxembourg—reflections of the sunny green lawn outside on the white paint inside, the lovely shapes of the delicate mahogany chair backs and slender table legs.

THE question where to settle, still deferred, now rose again: "It bothers me feeling—well, this—we got to get down to business and talk out some where I live. I want bad to talk with you and Put and Foster and Walt Griffin. I've been drifting. This surrounding saps my acquired poise as an artist, puts me back to youngest brother sitting silent in his corner of the table."

He decided, on the spur of a moment, to join me in France that summer, and created then, in *Caudebec*, his most thoroughly organized response to the architectural harmony of a French cathedral. He was back in Connecticut for the fall.

October 13, 1925. Down at Haling's again. Gray sunlit barn, a swell and infinitely subtle thing to hit. Little flame-like trees in the distance but all a pale pale tone of diffused sun. I do like it. . . Worked all morning. . . and tinkered only in the P.M. Afraid of it until I can go back for a couple of hours tomorrow morning and finish it. Not a big canvas. . . Out doors all day in the sun and wind, my face burns and I feel very full of health and energy. [This canvas of *Haling's Hill*, a variant of the same subject he had done in the winter of 1922, shows what he had learned through Griffin in the meantime.]

October 23. Lord what a day. . . Well as they line up there in the spotlight I should say yes and no—mostly no. Mr. Cheney five years ago would be tickled to death. A 24 x 30 of a white birch, an autumn hillside, a pale sky. Lunch at the cabin. A still life, also a 24 x 30, a turquoise vase, some white and pink chrysanthemums, a table top, very fresh and dashing. How versatile you are



HALING'S HILL—AUTUMN, 1925

Mr. Cheney—and Mr. Cheney ain't so God damn sure. What's it to him? Well, I'll tell you better tomorrow, because I painted and painted till by gosh it was too dark to see the flowers. Eager and vivid all right, carried right out of myself so I worked as tight as I could go. BUT I was carried right out of myself as I say—and what the hell way is that to paint?

October 26. A worthless day? Well, not exactly. I painted like a blasted idiot all morning, as flat and stupid as a warm pancake.

HE spent most of the winter of 1926 with his sister, Mrs. W. H. Cowles, in Santa Barbara, and made one of many painting trips into the desert near Palm Springs, with his friend the California watercolorist, Stan Wood.

Santa Barbara, January 13. All morning I was in town getting things ready and Fordy tuned up to snuff. . . Yesterday a wonderful all afternoon drive over the San Marcos pass, down the other side through the big ranch which I suppose is your father's. . . The Santa Ynez valley was magically beautiful—low sunlight on the blue violet mountains, the wide tan meadows and big oaks—Arcadia itself. When I get back, I will do some work there. I will take Giotto to the desert, buy a small Whitman, take Shropshire Lad, Hugo's Italian, a little Cézanne, cheap reproductions, and that's all. Giotto and Cézanne will be good company.

Palm Springs, January 21. Gee how it blew all morning, and how cold Pictor and Stan were sleeping out on the hillside. . . OK though and this morning I really got started. Tell you the truth, it's a number one. . . Just a drawing so far and I think I'll spend at least another hour on it tomorrow before I start paint. It's the best complete design I have ever struck. Just as abstract line and form it holds well and the color is full and vivid. Blue sky, tan palm thatch, some fine rich darks. . . How I've got to dig though on the detail of close-up stems.

Yesterday P.M. I got all excited over some great rain clouds across the valley, and lammed out a 29 x 36 in about two hours—mountains, plains, clouds, rain, cactuses, God knows what all. And it's not good enough. I suppose I'll save it—a good wallop would put it across as a dramatic piece. Then this P.M. I did another similar sunsetter, only small and not so bad. I'm getting the richer color I wanted to land. . . This minute I am perched in the front seat of Ford outside the cabin. Across the valley the hills are vivid rose with pale blue shadows, the sky orange and lemon.

January 22. *Desert Pool* went swell this morning. Got it mostly all laid in flat and simple and tomorrow should be interesting as hell trying to really nail it. . . Looking at the hurried sketch of yesterday afternoon I get a real kick out



DESERT POOL, 1926

of it, and after I've laid out in the sun a few minutes now and digested the sandwich and apple I had for lunch, and taken a bath in the hot sulphur pool, I'll slip down the canyon and take another crack at it. Color is good and strong anyhow. The palms turn and twist way up around the last corner of the mountains. The nearest ones hot orange and Irish green cut sharp against the deep ultramarine shadows behind them...

It is quiet and desolate up here, not a sound but water, the wind in the palms and sometimes a sudden chatter from some darn little bird. Our evening game of hearts is OK but it means no reading at all. Bed about 8:30 anyhow. Hugo, poor Hugo, hasn't been out of the box...I should worry. Why did the Lord give me such a happy conscience? Well, anyhow...I rather think *Desert Pool* is the step up we had an idea I was

going to take. It is orderly, simple, and has real style. If the color harmony works out, why something new is on deck.

January 23. Sitting out in Ford after painting some sort of a little desert sketch. Can't say whether it's any good or not. Stan says it is. We took Fordy after lunch and came down here on the flat to look around. Magnificent great blue shadows tranquil on the mountain but Mr. Cheney is perverse. First place tilts his brown felt hat over his eyes, ups with his feet in the corner of the capote and goes to sleep. Wakes and stretches and with one eye and three fingers of the left hand starts a sketch. Might as well. Gets caught, and sore because it doesn't come. Outs of the car and takes a knife to the sky—delightful result. Knife to the hills—equally charming. First thing he is on his knees in the sand painting hard. With what result? Tell you tomorrow.

Desert Pool progressed. Rich tone in sky and trees, but needs a wallop tomorrow if its boasted first place is to be maintained.

January 25. Perched on a rock, stripped down to get the sun on me, glaring sun. Gray rocks, bristly cactus, gray sage, deep blue sky, some sort of a little wren singing its head off, tries a quaver, hops to the next rock, cocks its head at me, tries another. A burly bee dozes by. The mesquite is in bloom and



dozens of tiny delicate desert flowers. A lizard darts, does his daily dozen on a rock to mock me. It's a day off. The goddam Palm Trees can wave and glisten for all I care. Well, just what are you doing, Mr. Cheney? I'm reading Pepys' Diary!! Of all insane incongruities, can you beat it? Young Sir Harry Vane. And my Lord Chesterfield killed a man and is off by dawn. To Sermon and then to dinner. The bell-man came by with his bell just under my window as I was writing of this very line, and cried, "Past one of the clock, and a cold, frosty, windy morning," and so here we are back to Cambridge...

Sun a bit too dazzling, so I shirted myself, slipped Pepys with other sundry papers in my hip pocket, and dodged back to the Canyon across the rocky lurking reptile mesa. Thrice a sibilant Hiss drove the fixed needle of my intention wavering N.N.E.—S.S.W., yet toward the sturdy Ford I held my way, and so at last I sank to rest uttering a prayer to that great Deity of the Desert—Henry Ford—saying as labored breathing shook the shaggy cavern of my breast, Oh Thou, Great Leveller, Harnesser of the power of the timid mouse, Father of Millions, if ever within thy tinny crank case stirred a human thought, accept now the token of my gratitude. And so I spat to windward, and on the food laid out before them they laid hands.

January 26. *Desert Pool* comes along well... There is the old wallop in it, and how the pattern swoops around... A real chance maybe tomorrow to clean up on it. I've had a clearer idea anyhow of what the construction of a picture is. I have seen the thing whole even if it doesn't hold that way yet and probably never will—a tight inevitable arrangement which I can get, a clear coldly luminous single light which I can't get. Made the other big one of the Canyon which I allowed to paint itself look wobbly and trivial, and that's the one everyone will like. They don't like the relentless quality that belongs to a work of art. Hear me talk! Jesus Christ, I am Cézanne, the great immobile enigma, an honest mountain peak serene above its fellows, a great mind in a puny world. That's me all over, and all because for five minutes, five days ago, I had one instant of clear vision. I'm a damn bourgeois imitation of an artist, that's what I am. Pity is I know it. I could turn out such nice pictures and serve tea with them so charmingly. Balls.

Back at Santa Barbara, February 13. Funny thing as I woke it was Put I was thinking of, and sat up suddenly to write him... Short but real as hell because I suddenly (rested I guess) saw the whole perspective of this trip, the quality of work I did and the quality of what I visioned in *Desert Pool* and didn't achieve, and that was the only real thing, and I let it go, and all the rest which are good are only good old time stuff, the old life and snap, only better, but not the keen knife-edge of the real thing. And the easy sense of being home and rested and more or less content snapped like a gut string—zing!! And the poor pitiful canvases and panels, how helter-skelter and chanceful they look...

They're only better in richness and vitality. They haven't got the cold stuff of perfection. Well it was sort of an instinct to make confession at once to Put. He with Foster seeming to occupy something like the place of an artistic conscience, as he created it in me, at least called it out.

February 14. We are amused and damn well amused by the canvas Mr. Cheney started yesterday P.M. and nearly finished in a coup de foudre ce matin. *Calla Lilies* it will be called in future monographs. A sea green pale background, white bowl, twisting, aspiring, very sexually inclined white lilies, each with a darting yellow pricker. A damn good job, if I do say so. Nervous tension pretty high. Mr. Cheney is on the war-path. Snapp snapp, gee how that radio does spark. Just a touch of wickedness in its snapp.

February 15. The *Callas* are good. Finished it up this morning. The best drawing I ever got in a canvas. It's vivid all right. What next?

March 8. Alex Lambert and Hermann Hagedorn swapping anecdotes of T.R. gave me a richer impression of his personality than I ever had before. Rather crystallized him as a moral force and pointed how little I cared for moral force in comparison to—well—to what? What do I care for? What are the permanently valuable or rather essential purposes? Well, I'd like a look at the windows of Chartres. Homer's version of the old men like grasshoppers cheerful on the walls of Troy, and there they are. I would not like to listen too long to the old men cheerfully gossiping on any walls unless Helen or Achilles came by.

Oh Mr. Cheney, how futile you are. Please, please just try to be reasonable and please do a little work tomorrow just for a change you know, and please put out the light and your hands under your cheek and your cheek on the pillow and go to sleep. That's the boy. I'm asleep. Good night.

March 25. Roland Hayes—a whole new figure suddenly a part of my life. A tense alert eagerly boyish quality, tip-toe with energy, so completely a part of each song that you see him recollect himself several long instants afterward. The grace of a marvellously compact figure, he stirred me strongly. . . . As I came into the room at home, I looked into a great deep red rose on the table, and that was he. It was startling, so like the impression that crowded and hammered and throbbed in me. I am as though I'd drunk 6 cups of black coffee, and yet it was calm deep melodious music, perfect vibrant finished art.

I have been cynically indifferent to the fact that I've been idle wasteful vulgar—putting off till tomorrow. This feller burns me with shame. He is alive and I drift. There is no art without that consecration. Will I ever tie to that—the long quiet of that humming silence the studio has, with me alone up against myself? You can back me. . . . and help me keep true to that *necessity to be alone*. There's no other road to the truth of art. God damn this shiftless lazy muck that crowds and veils my soul.



CALLA LILIES, 1926

South Manchester, April 18. I got out bright and early to paint pink tulips, and lo it was a *bum* arrangement, a mere muddle, a dreary disaster. I fussed and fumed (anything with an fd, go as far as you like) till 11:30, and still no infant masterpiece. I would not start at random so I didn't start. A case of artistic conscience? of a watered will power? or merely a *crise des nerfs*? I bet I arranged 30 careful still lifes.

Now it's after lunch...and now I am headed back to the studio to consider this and that. *Desert Pool* holds as a bulwark against rout and confusion. It really is fair.

IN the summer and fall of 1926 Cheney went to Venice again, with definite ideas of just what he wanted to paint, ideas that were articulated in passages of several letters. He did a series of combined still life and landscape, flower pieces on a window sill overlooking the Riva degli Schiavoni. Each successive canvas aimed at greater elimination. He bore this series in mind when he wrote a couple of years later: "The next step is to concentrate vision and intention into something so fused in my mind it will dominate, will exist as a new force more irrespective of detail in the canvas. One way you could express it clumsily—'less subject,' but that's because subject is not quite put in its place. *Lilies and Salute* did it, but that wasn't painted. I had painted that subject three times and thoroughly entered it, so it came out the next time whole in conception, but I was satisfied too soon. I was delighted to have Chester Aldrich last night say he got a great kick from it when he saw it in New Haven."

With the oncoming of autumn he wanted to depict the more somber Venice, not the lush Renaissance memory, but the city of decay.

September 22. An old painter I know—darn nice—came originally from Windsor—Tuttle by name—paints sometimes very well—came along to see my stuff and we talked and talked. Says he, "Florence has gotten into your work at Venice. It has distinction and severity that carry it ahead of any you've done before." Maybe it's true. It's what we hoped, isn't it?

September 27. In my wandering yesterday I spotted a fine bridge, *Ponte Molin*...a splendid built-up arrangement. I drew and drew again, just filling in color in flat planes sharply separated...This vein—the dry hard outline, clear light one is growing more and more the dominant one.

September 28. These busy days are really happy. I think I have never been absorbed this way in what I am doing before. Never been free before as I am now...Something brand new is in the world all right. As I sit here this minute the white bridge one, the new one this afternoon of the bridge by San Giovanni

e Paolo, the yesterday *Ponte Molin* are lined up in the light and there is a vitality to them I have never glimpsed even before except probably the big *Desert Pool* one. . . This morning it was a torrent of rain. I had a fine breakfast, the only one out it was so cold and blustery. Read Whitman and struck that swell place:

Long enough have you dreamed contemptible dreams,
You must habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and of every moment
of your life.

Long enough have you timidly waded, holding a plank by the shore,
Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,
To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again, nod to me, shout,
And laughingly dash with your hair.

I toned down enough to work at odd jobs all morning. First the *Ponte Molin* needed drawing. The white bridge I solved the trouble of by putting in a quite white sky—a *great* improvement. Then I got out the side ways one of San Giorgio with lilies. Tuttle had pointed out to me how the line of the island ran way way down hill and I couldn't see anything else. Well, that went well too—a whole lot better.

September 29. A swell harsh bleak day—gray lowering sky, scurrying figures in black and gray capes and black felt hats, the water toward San Giorgio pale yellowish green with white scuds, the sky cold deep blue purple out to sea. Just what I wanted for the new bridge one which proves to be *Ponte di Ruga Vecchia*, the “old road,” Venetian dialect. . . It's a fine arrangement, and I got it about the same level, a bit solidier than any, I guess.

September 30. Today started off bad. I had a good idea of the spot opposite the Pescaria with a view of the Rialto and Palace but it was full up, two barges loading furniture and bricks. Nothing to do but go away. I had along the *Ponte di Ruga Vecchia*, unfortunately, and went and painted on that for an hour or so, just long enough to put in unrelated detail it's so much better without. It's lost pep, but maybe I can pull it back. . . Early lunch. . . and back to my spot by one o'clock. Nobody home—all sleeping—so I got just my spot and sailed in from then till 5:00, pulling off the easy best one yet. I have a pretty definite scheme of drawing so carefully and fully I can just go ahead fitting it in without thought. I may be kidding myself, but they do seem good. This one has a cold steely harsh quality of color. It was raining half the time and real cold and blustery. Read *Othello* yesterday and day before. I wish Barrymore would do Iago and I could see him do it.

October 1. Well, well, Mr. Cheney's painted Venice—just like 'em all. A lovely sunny morning led him away. . . On the quai from the steps of the

Palladio church he was beguiled. It was so gay and lively and brisk. Settled down to draw—Uugh! and by the time he'd finished the day was clouded, but still brisk and lively. A big one (at least 23 x 28) . . . Well it has some qualities . . . I don't know . . .

After tea I went to get 6 new canvases, the new small size. Watch me smear 'em up. I can't tell you the queer eager itch there is in me at the idea of drawing tight and hard, and then the color setting into this new "gesso" canvas—it's thirsty and grabs the paint from your brush, leaving a fine dry fresco-like surface and color quality . . . You can think better if you know (a) it pays to draw much, often, (b) it pays to not drink whiskey too much, too often.

October 3. Things are very flat just this afternoon. I went over and started a new and larger one of the garden . . . on the Adriatic side of the Giudecca . . . but it was very mechanical and lifeless and left me with the rotten what's the use feeling so strong that after a sleep after lunch I just quit and went to walk it off. Thing is I question all this work. I question its value and when I look at Lorenzetti's *Madonna del Latte* on the wall, I say what the hell? Where are we tearing to and why? . . . Work is a great anaesthetic. Work enough, you don't have to think one bit, and that's what hurts—thinking.

October 16. My birthday suddenly leaps at me from a calendar on the barber shop wall . . . What's more I celebrated my birthday unknown to me by painting a very bad little canvas . . . The Boats this afternoon went bad on me, or rather the sticky absorbent canvas got my goat, and I started to tear it out by the roots, and got fairly muddy. (Just the chance that when I see it tomorrow this will not be true at all.)

Padua, October 25. The difference in faces of people here from Venice is amazing. We didn't notice as I do alone, there is a distinct university-town look, also an authentic look you hardly ever see among the crowding leech-like Venetians and fat travellers . . . You won't believe it but Pictor was almost futile all morning! In fact the only thing he did all day besides getting here was to resist the tendency to paint foolish subjects. The first temptation the Piazza San Marco with bridge and pools of water. Breakfast there was sunny and warm and put ideas in his head. But it's a silly idea . . . After a couple of little try drawings of it, I beat it, box and all . . .

After lunch it was raining again, settled in, I'm afraid . . . and it's getting my goat. I came here to dodge it as well as see Giotto . . . It's better not to paint than paint a trivial thing, isn't it? You should never see or desire to paint a trivial thing. You only do because to that extent you are trivial, or is it bad habit from seeing bad pictures by bad painters? . . . Tomorrow will be great—to walk into the Arena Chapel again, and see good painting by a good painter.

Padua, October 26. I had such a kick from the painting I don't know where to begin. . . I don't think the day produced any new impression really. As you said, we had all we could get till we grew enough ourselves to see with new eyes. But it refreshed me deeply and was the greatest pure pleasure I can imagine. Now here's the question. That feller found the medium of expression of his deep tender nature. What's another feller going to do who hasn't found his? Painting views of Venice is not enough, no matter how abstract and decorative they may be made. I'm more human than that. What are we going to do about it? because it can't be put off any longer. . . How about real portraits, to really get the sensitive elusive quality of a feller like Put or Louis Hyde? Or another quality of, say, Otto Bannard? What Put calls my Jehovah landscapes satisfy me in one way. Those gay flower-in-the-window ones are another direct expression. Maybe this winter I can try out some nudes and see if I can haul out something there. Trouble is that's so damn artificial. Figure is only a medium of expressing a mood or idea, just as a landscape is. They both move you *per se* in their own way. So does a red pepper, a green pepper and a head of lettuce—or say a banana—completing the circle. Everybody is moved—painter or not. The thing is to get the motive impulse down in concrete form. A very droll object in life? One thing I got a new sense of today was the extreme delicacy of some heads, equalling say the raised hand of the Angel of Annunciation.

Venice, October 27. In moments here this fall I have been acutely alone and lonely—they are moments of low courage when work was stale—but mostly no. . . Before I started to write this I hung out the window a minute: a great dark cloud down over the Salute, wisps of rain across the brilliant gash of red sky, the domes purple against it, people scurrying by on the wet pavement, and I was happy. . .

There is still the hard hard road of forcing myself step by step out of mediocrity to some real form of art. Some permanent tangible form. I feel strength and glowing warmth of love in me. It's partly sloth bodily and mental to overcome, but I must find myself.

In New York, that December, sizing things up for his next show. I'm back into close touch with my own painting. The cause is the unexpected one of having my boxes of Palm Springs and other canvases turn up. I spent the first half of the morning at unpacking them and what a wallop when I got *Desert Pool* up on the wall. It has a smouldering vitality like a deep deep red geranium. Here in the half dusk it seems to throb. I wrote Put. . . saying the Venetian Flower pieces look as though they were painted by slender white hands beside the *Pool* and *Calla Lilies*. The Venice bridge ones could go in the same room. These can't.



FLOWERS IN VENICE, 1926



LILIES AND SALUTE, 1926



RIALTO, 1926

FOR the winter of 1927 Cheney took a studio in New York, and engaged various models in order to reinforce himself in what he needed to know if he was to go ahead with portraits. The climax of that experience was recorded on two successive days:

March 9. You've got to fight for the calm and possession of yourself necessary to live and produce art. Chasing it to quiet spots may help sometimes, but essentially you've got to create it—raise yourself by your own boot-straps to attain the poise necessary for freedom. To attain that I have to fight against “natural” lusts of the flesh and for drink (both artificially created?) and for the sense of personal independence—of not being supervised—what you call the youngest brother attitude. It is also a class and social innate consciousness of being on view—of your social place making it right and proper that you should be. Well, I don't want freedom from that to indulge the lusts. I've always managed to ignore the oversight when I wanted to bad enough. But I do feel increasingly the need for independence in my intimate thoughts, to exercise my own judgment on matters of life and art, to not have a mean sneaking little back thought somewhere: “Is it good to live with?” What in Christ's name is that to me? I don't want to live with it. I want to create it, as all children are created, for the fun of it. And here's the lesson I got from the big international show yesterday—not that I found any world crashers there, but that when I left I found things to paint wherever my eyes fell.

Look at this—people going up the subway stairs dark and hurried against a steel impassive sky. Is it a fly in my ointment makes me add the “hurried” and “impassive”? Dark people against the steel sky. That's one way. Is it better than this taut way that keeps me tearing at my vitals?

That's what last week and the time before were—growing pains... If I dismayed you and made you doubt the future sometimes, don't kid yourself. I've got him by the tail still even if my feet do fly off the ground sometimes.

I feel some artificiality in doing this nude. The query whether the desire to do it is real or an acquired thing from old days of art training. My detachment from it and real indifference to whether it's good or bad (it's coming better but hatched up and tortured looking) make it look as though I'd rather be quiet and alone over a couple of tulips.

For the first time I grudge my show crashing into my life. I begin to have a life worth living.

March 10. This A.M. at 11:45...I fired Haakon [his model] for good. It's Lewis Mumford's fault and the multinational show. I'll be God damned if I ever paint another academic morgue. *I'm through.*

I had a big time last night. Things just set. I deliberately dressed in dinner-coat, went to the University Club with *The Golden Day* under my arm, which I began during oysters and crab Newburg, salad and coffee—and continued down in a big chair in the silent library till I finished it at 12:15. Jesus, how the old mind which painters have not was stimulated, and how that middle aged dub in a dinner coat was humping. Incarnate revolt and independence of the spider-webbed hamperings which have kept him down. For a few minutes Gulliver turned over, and they all snapped ping ping like violin strings. I kept quietly chuckling to myself and you over the sweet sense of quiet and repose of mind which left me free to alarum and excursion as much as you please. Gee how his appreciation of Whitman touched me. . . Well, when I sat here at home later eating a bowl of bread and milk, Haakon was there, frozen dead. A pitiful attempt at virtuosity, and what the hell's that to me? Unless I can put myself into what I do, I'll never paint again. That's flat.

THE first portrait to give him satisfaction was of his friend the Hartford lawyer, Farwell Knapp, who had married Cheney's favorite niece. He placed Knapp's seated figure against a background of books, and was particularly pleased with "the 'abstract' side of it—the design of sofa and books seems to fall in fine. The fragile wood work holding the solid heavy figure, gives a sort of buoyance to it all, and perhaps a suggestion of a Forest Street background to a sturdy intellectual modern feller."

Filled with an increasing desire also to paint New England, and yet not be swamped by too much family, he tried the experiment of settling at Kittery Point, Maine for the summer and fall. He had known that region as a boy, since his mother's family had come from Exeter, New Hampshire. I was beginning to work on a biography of Sarah Orne Jewett, a project which he, as a great admirer of *The Country of the Pointed Firs* and a friend of the Jewett family, had suggested to me. So we rented a cottage together. He responded at once to the region, and was very productive. He did landscapes of two different kinds: in some, like *Elrida's Swing*, he caught the sunnier, more gracious aspects of the New England scene; in others, like *Depot Square*, he concentrated on its bleakness. In *Sea Breeze* he did a "comic," the rickety summer hotel under a lowering sky of thunder. In *Chocolate Daisies* he pursued farther his experiments in interrelating still life and landscape. In *Kittery Point*, painted at the end of summer, looking down on the harbor from the roof of the Parkfield Hotel, he produced a brilliant canvas which was subsequently invited to the World's Fair exhibition in Chicago in 1933, and later acquired by the Boston Museum. But what absorbed him most was his portrait of Phelps Putnam.



ELRIDA'S SWING, 1927



DEPOT SQUARE, 1927



SEA BREEZE, 1927



CHOCOLATE DAISIES, 1927



KITTERY POINT, 1927

Kittery Point, October 2, 1927. I struck out from shore all right today with a *damn good* drawing for Put's picture. Started with this idea [an indicated sketch of Putnam leaning his head in his hand as he wrote, with the harbor view from the porch behind him] but modified leaving out all background and laying his right hand on the table. If I can keep the speed when I paint tomorrow it will be high-water mark. The weather is wonderful, warm and sunshiny, the trees turning to full color.

October 3. This has been a good day. First off the portrait went fine. Painted off and on all morning, mostly on the head, then laid in the gray background and brown leather coat before I stopped, so it's all set to nail the head tomorrow. There's a lot of light in it and good form. Not much detail likeness but I am sure of that I think with the start I got. After lunch I lay out a while and read *Mont St. Michel and Chartres*, then packed over to Portsmouth and started a good sized one I've had in mind of the street past the Langdon house. Autumn color. I'll wait till daylight before I'm sure, but here in the electric light it looks first rate. Very finished looking somehow.

October 4. Sitting here with a fire—supper finished and put away—so thoroughly beaten again at dummy hearts I won't play again till Ruth gets here. . . . I worked on the portrait and it is coming fine. Has the quality of extreme simplicity and a sort of inevitable concentration on the character and purpose of the figure. It is better than Knapp's because more thoroughly felt ahead of time. I put in the table top, candle stick, ink bottle, cigarettes, etc. this afternoon. Ready for the hands and another go at the head tomorrow. Put likes it very much. We talked a lot of Roland Hayes and the wonderful way he has concentrated on his work. I've been puzzling about just why Woodbury isn't better. Decided it's because he doesn't simplify and eliminate down to essentials enough. The phrase "millioned accidents" came in my head while I was trying to eliminate them in Put's head this morning and get it down to the plain form as simply as I could. We talk a lot of the possible picture of the *Enfants Pendus* and whether we couldn't go to Foster's after he is there in November and do it perhaps.

October 5. The portrait goes well, very well I guess. This morning was warm and sunny and tranquil. I get up about 7:30, have breakfast which I carry to the lower porch in the sun. I go for the mail and fuss around, make the bed, etc. Put gets up and is dressed by about 10 when I have already settled to work with fussing on details, background, and so on. He writes and I either work at the head or if he is unsteady, branch off to the hands. It carries it along well together. Tomorrow I should finish unless I go ahead and do a lot more. In the afternoon I've worked without him on details, and taking cracks at the head as ideas came to me. We put it up side of Knapp's this evening. It is far more solidly modelled, moves about inside the frame the way I like to feel it.

Very decidedly less decorative and stylish. On the whole a more mature job. We talk a lot of the possible big one of the 3 *Enfants*.

October 6. I've been here on the porch luxuriating in the warm sunshine, warm enough to have the shifting sea breeze feel fresh and stimulating. I was up and in for a fine swim before the breeze came up, the rocks and sun so hot I sat there a bit waiting for the fine sharp plunge. Then breakfast... and all morning have been putting in time pushing the portrait. As far as I can see now feller it is absolute. To me now it is *just like Put*, both actual looks and general feel of his intense hard pushing thought. It is too cool and atmospheric all through to quite look like actual flesh. I don't know what to do about that. It seems foolish to go after that at the risk of never getting back what we both feel now is top point I have reached so far. I will certainly consider before I touch it any more except a few wobbly places in the folds of the coat...

We got started somehow on talk that carried us way into the night... Vivid as any talk I ever had with him. I got renewed the sense of how he stimulates to strong grasp of life physical and intellectual whoever comes in contact with him. A strong force, dangerous to anyone weak. He made me feel how his strong affection for me was based not on past help and sympathy, but on respect for some quality in me equal to himself. The way he spoke also of Foster and Manning's opinion of my actual potential force as an artist made me feel the need of shedding more continually the sort of hesitating self-depreciation I fall into. Three people like that and you... believing I have the stuff. Well, I can't explain why I suddenly feel another step along the road but I do...

The leaves are falling in eddies and showers with each new puff of the breeze. There's a sort of ripeness and cool vigor in the air that just hits the mood I am in. I ought to do some good work the next weeks.

October 16. A perfect day. Here under the hill it's warm and quiet, the tide is slipping past covering rock after rock... Yesterday and today in a sense are frustrated ones, in another sense are extremely valuable. I arranged and arranged on a still life I conceived lying in bed on the porch. Gladiolas against the water... Arranged and arranged, shifted an inch here, played over the idea of emphasis, whether it was a study of flowers in the sun or of rocks and water with the flowers up front like Venice. When I finally settled and had gone to Frisbee's for tacks to stretch the canvas it was 12:25! After lunch the sun was so blinding I couldn't think of work on it. I trifled over the landscape toward the village which is n.g.—one of those queer pallid washed-out hangovers of Mr. Cheney of 1907. Ghosts—Revenants.

That's why I am not painting this minute. I realize that I have laid out a fine subject, but it is one that spread out over a 42 x 42 inch canvas is going to be thin and flashy if I paint as the flowers are now in sunlight. Possibly a good

study of flowers, possibly not, but certainly not the strained whole unity of line and form that would put them in place structurally and emotionally as rich autumn—the dull leaves caught up an octave or two—or three—to the flame of the gorgeous color. Well, that’s that—seeing what I’m about, and so I am here in sunlight warm and full of life, with a sense of continuity. 46 years old for the first time, trying to figure out what I want and what I don’t want and accepting the limitations of necessity in cutting out what I only half want. Put’s portrait and the *Depot Square* come the closest of the summer to having the dignity I want. They are just not rounded to the full rich vitality of tone I want, but I think they are paintings. *Kittery Point* for spontaneity and rich warmth of vitality—the Luxembourg but not the Louvre—all of ’em. God damn it, I can get there.

Put and I talked till 1:30 mostly on his idea of the need to accept the “mountebank” class as he calls it, indifferent to all the petty compromises “regular” people demand. For him publishing his inner thoughts it is true. For me somewhat true also—I wouldn’t let him drive me to his point, however.

THIS sonnet about Cheney made a part of Putnam’s series, *Seven Against Chance*, in his first book *Trinc* (1927). A line in an earlier version spoke of Cheney as “dark uncle of my heart.”

Christ never rose again, but you arose,
My ribald saint, out of a deathly bed
To snatch my insubstantial life from those
Despairs and poisons which had made me dead.

How dark and delicate you are, and yet
How full of blood, and I am only caught
In irony, a nervous vulgar net.
We were a sturdy differential fraught

With an unlikely mirth, and hand in glove
Between strange-sorted friends and gay disdain;
But all the time, beyond my scope of love,
Lonely you prowled the inward vaults of pain,

Seeking, beyond harsh loyalty, some rest
From bearing the vague misery of quest.



PHELPS PUTNAM, 1927

Later in the fall of 1927 Cheney started his big canvas of "Les Enfants Pendus," of whom Putnam had written, in one of the episodes of his mythical hero, Bill Williams:

Then in the very midst, in Boston, Bill
Came to a blossoming tree, and thereon hung
Three young men by the neck and were not dead.
Before them stood three amphoras of gin
And in their mouths their words bloomed like the tree.
And Bill was lonely in such company
And said, "My name is Williams, who are you?"
And one replied, "Three children born to sin,
The Hung-Up Children, *Les Enfants Pendus*,
And a most exclusive club. Meet me and meet
My friends," and then he laughed so long and sweet
That even Bill himself laughed into Hell
And was a better man. The same one said,
"My name is Foster, that is Putnam, and
The dashing one is called Mitch Davenport." . . .

And Putnam, rearranging first his rope
So that it sat with ghastly jauntiness,
Raised up his pointed chin and said . . .
"You are a hero, Bill,
The acreage of Hell is not your home . . .
Go—and remembering how you saw me hang,
Avoid those ropes which strangulate the will."

Cheney painted the group at Foster's house near Topsfield, with one rather than three amphoras of Prohibition bathtub gin, and gave "the dashing one" a foil since Davenport was very proud of having been intercollegiate fencing champion. Cheney wrote about this canvas briefly: "I've been laying in the panels and fire-place back of them. At first it was just a bore, but as I got into it and started carrying color businesses through the whites, it got fun and has pulled the whole together well. The difficult peak is going to be the expressions. I have thoroughly characteristic poses right through. Mitch was saying last night that's where I showed I knew my job."

He continued to be bothered by the likenesses, and worked on this canvas off and on for several years. At one of his worst moments over it, he wrote: "I started in to repaint Foster's head after lunch . . . I floundered and floundered just as I have all day. The head is real and solid, the best head of the



LES ENFANTS PENDUS, 1927-8

three from the point of view of actual weight etc., but it isn't him and I'll be damned if I can make it him. It's confusing. First glance is fine and it carries very well...but what black misery. I never went so low for so long. Perhaps because when I've felt like this I've quit and run. I'll be damned if I'll run. I'll also be damned if I can get it. It's tearing down a cement wall with your finger nails."

He finally got to like this canvas, for simplicity of spacing, the best of his group portraits, of which other examples, not included here, are of Witter Bynner, Louisa Pugh, and Danny McCarthy in Santa Fe (1929), and of Harry Dorman and myself over a bottle of Jameson's Irish (1935).

THE next two years look in retrospect mainly like another siege of growing pains. Cheney no longer tried to paint in his Manchester studio, except for a couple of months in the winter of 1928, when he turned out one of the still lifes with which he remained most satisfied: "the most beautiful pale mauve tulips in a pot, and I got a good arrangement with a drapery of much the same color and a little white Kwanyin, all drawn in solid...Subtle in conception, a 'synthesis,' as they say, of line and tone, and very colorful."

But most of the time there he was thrashing around, though he hit another sketch that delighted him: "A still life in mockery of ——'s 'wistful ovary' pictures. The God of the Belly with white sprouting onions and wine bottles on a green table. I am itching to hear Knapp laugh when he sees it tonight. It really is 'drôle.' The round onions exactly repeat his form. A very lively Van Gogh sort of wormy handling. I made a careful drawing in the morning yesterday. Then at lunch caught a different angle on it out the corner of my eye, so much better I took a new and larger canvas and started all over."

He spent many hours, as always, over his books of reproductions: "I am filled with all the Cézanne books. Have laid them out all evening and all this morning, comparing, reading bits here and there. L'Ecorché is right. I've about decided that after overcoming his nature and giving up the Romantics, he started on an equally impossible and fruitless beating his head against the wall of all those nude bathers. The climax, the last great 20 foot one of the Pellerin collection, he worked on 10 years.

"He dominated and organized form and colour. In *The Card Players* and a few portraits he infused a deep understanding of (feeling for?) humanity. They and the magnificently ordered still lifes are the stuff...I am letting my ideas play around the corner comparing him with Giotto, and what can take the place of religious emotion. It is a pertinent question, in fact the crux of the whole matter. So far I think it is the humanity of *The Card Players*, the beauty

of *Madame Cézanne in the Greenhouse*, and so on. Emotionally and technically what's the difference between organized form here or there?"

That summer, at Kittery Point again, he determined to be less "literal," more "stylized." He now regarded even the previous season's landscapes as "solid and capable—better than any group of the sort I've had before, but it's not enough. They copy life, they are not alive with a sense of organic wholeness in themselves. . . . That Derain *Man in the Derby* haunts me and inspires me. It has the pulse you feel pounding through you to the finger tips. That's what you've got to have, nothing else but, to be satisfied."

He put in a good deal of time on portraits of Louis Hyde and myself, which pleased him for their organization of space, though they were less distinguished than the one of Putnam. In the fall Woodbury came over from Ogunquit to see the season's crop: "He was very satisfactory. Said principally, as I knew he would, that color was the chief lack. In detail he showed how the medium ones . . . could be brought up to stuff. Warmth in the sun, cool in the shadows. Says I have a weakness for cold greens in sunlight which give the effect of light all right, but an electric brilliance not of the sun. A good solid mechanical fact like that is the best of boosts, I think. It makes me eager to go ahead on all of those near goods and see what happens.

"He likes best the long Newcastle houses and the long Frisbee's wharf and the black day with little white houses. . . . I can see he thinks it a good solid step ahead of last year. Hope Smith said how much more achieved they looked too, as though I got what I was after."

Cheney was even more set up by a retrospective session with Griffin, who was on hand for one of his exhibitions in Hartford: "Walt came across fine. I took him to the gallery and he spent an hour—*Kittery Point*, *Depot Square*, *Lilies and Salute*, *Putnam*, *Lungarno*, *Ponte di Ruga Vecchia*. The substance, after detailed suggestion, was that I ought to paint less and 'dream' more. He means, of course, dream over the actual canvas, work and listen to it, and work again. Ten pictures a year better than thirty, but as much work on ten as on thirty. Well, that's right, isn't it? . . . He liked especially the modelling of Put's head. As he left me at the station, he said, 'You're all right, only dream more over them'."

In the winter of 1928-9 he rented a studio in New York again, and worked on portraits of, among others, Katherine Hepburn and Marcia Davenport. New York always stimulated him to the point that he finally burst like a sky-rocket. After one explosion he took temporary refuge in my New Haven apartment, while I was away, and left a note: "You did me a hell of a lot of good, quieted and balanced me. And the Italian primitives at the gallery set me ahead to demand more than I have perhaps let myself down to out of these portraits. . . . But the constant flow of contemporary observation and easy



LAVENDER TULIPS, 1928



NEWCASTLE, 1928

interest are qualities I guess inherent in a painter. . . I sat an hour or so in the quiet of your home here and the books seemed unfamiliar. . . A bird or a woman hanging out clothes opposite would catch my eye and I'd watch them move, idly but closely. My show. . . seems to say clearly to me that I'm not a silly feller either technically or from point of view of interpretation and selection."

In the midst of one of his tortured spells, he wrote to Putnam: "You fancy you tread Hell. Well, so do I—mincing steps on the hot cinders. . . Solitude, I can't seem to stand it. The gregarious upbringing, I suppose. Now you and Matty have taken away my cloak, my camouflage. . . my 'gentlefolk,' and the wind blights my skinny legs and my blood is thin and I hide the emptiness with this or that—drink, lust, sociability. Art? Now will you just tell me, Mr. Putnam, is Art a little game to be replaced by planting pear trees as John Cheney found? or a delicate emotion as Seth Cheney found? . . . Or is there just this God damn chance I've met one of those blasted cherubims with seven wings up and seven wings down. . . seven wings taut as a sea-gull? Well from this God awful smother and misery which cuts like a shark's tooth is anything coming out? It's up to me alone, as it's up to you. God in his gentle mercy help us. Just this—don't forget. . . I just keep my head above water—just. . .

"Sunday. The foregoing seems a bit incoherent as well as incredibly difficult to decipher. A touch of alcohol in it, I opine. However, its substance is accurate, and I'll let it go for you to make out if you can."

In spite of an immense vitality that often exhausted his friends, the pressures under which he was boiling brought a flare-up of his tuberculosis. He drank too much, and slept too little, and had to go back to Colorado for six months. But he relaxed and embraced this interval as another one of those disguised blessings. He repossessed himself. He got to know Rivera's work for the first time, and was deeply moved by his early frescoes for being authentically in Giotto's tradition. He studied very carefully a book of Picasso, for though Cheney felt no compulsion to work in pure abstraction himself, he had come to regard Picasso as the best living painter. He read Proust through for the second time, and found much to hearten his solitude in the *Journal of Katherine Mansfield*. He declared that *Henry IV* was still his favorite play in all literature.

When his lungs had subsided and his nerves were restored, he contrasted "the vaguely idealistic kid" he had been when he started out to paint with "the unregulated passionate distracted feller I've been these last years, and, I think, a different feller I am now. I think. . . I've achieved a dignity of conscious possession of myself I haven't known before. I must not let Time crowd me now—in possession of myself and capably trained technically. . . I

mustn't be terrified at being 47 years old. I should be where I am now at 27—but I'm there and will paint. . . Thank God I got the TB again.

"One thing I am trying to do is to define my limitations as a painter—not be quite so Jehovey. I don't really feel even the best portrait work top notch. I'd want more pure creation than that. And yet whatever it is, it can have such a hard and fast inevitable frame-work of abstract form and color, good for its own sake, that it holds as real, irrespective of subject matter. Isn't that all a modern who has no religious matter to express can do?"

Writing to Putnam, who had just sent him his poem, *Daughters of the Sun*, Cheney added: "Sooner or later my personality and my job will meet. . . What a funny bottled-up silent figure of a feller to have trailed his course through Paris and New York. . . always kept from really tackling his job by the confusion of his person. Must be a pretty damn strong urge for it back there to overcome every mental and moral inaptitude. John and Seth must have been very similar, you know, especially Seth. Funny I should be all them and look like Mother's family. . . I didn't say what I was leading up to about *Trinc* and the *Daughters*, about the latter having the quality I only lately recognize as necessary for any work of art—the feller having put his blood into it and also withdrawn himself after, so it stands of itself."

He was well by late summer, but he knew that he had better not face, as yet, another eastern winter, and decided to work in New Mexico.

Santa Fe, September 24, 1929. I am a little flat. So are my resources. I am up against finding out what it is that's the vital spot of painting for me. It is not copying, even arranging and copying things, still life or landscape. I've got to make it out of me and I don't know the road. With portraits it would be the same, but I would have fun getting the person. That would give it life. What I do has life enough—the one yesterday afternoon I was so disgusted about looked damn good today from that aspect, but it's not enough. Believe me it's no joke to try and do something you don't even know what it is. It's an ache in you that needs an answer. At least I have visualized the step that is the next one, and discontent and thrashing is better than complacency.

I bought a big bunch of zinnias for next shot—black vase and yellow wall—vivid as it can be. . . My color is better anyhow. I have an idea of the big saint's figure on the mantelpiece set stark against a view of Abique. Somehow or other this is a cruel outfit around here.

September 26. Well, I hardly know how to describe today. How would you? Good intentions carried high—sort of hammering on the closed door of what I want to do. Neither landscape nor still life as I've done them fill the bill or the spot in me that has an ache, a sharp desire for something. This idea of the saint on the barren plaza at Abique has got something. I've figured out the

shape and plan of it. Late today I get the actual photographs I had Mr. Parkhurst make... If I can get the harsh angularity I have in mind, it will be something.

I took Fordy and poked slowly up the Canyon Road, stopping at every turn. There's lots of material. My eye is still alert for the wrong thing—the picturesque, dramatic arrangement, not the solid construction which makes either landscape or still life worth doing. I feel in a way like sitting at home and making up a landscape to suit me. Have the big Cézanne book out and feed on that. Giotto moves me more than he does.

September 27. I've ripped out a really good start on the big picture. I've got the stark harsh quality of the saint cold... The cross throwing a black shadow across the house behind it. Dark clouds with livid streak of cold green below. Stark flinty quality of light on houses. And empty plaza. Haven't quite worked out the design of houses yet, but they are getting solid looking. I've felt really into it, not sort of standing by, and the drawing shows that all right.

October 4. I have had such a good day, such a very good day... I got round to the picture in a leisurely way—sort of stalking it. Started in to paint the head carefully, found I couldn't establish a thing without the sky behind it, so little by little I was in full swing, and by noon the whole damn thing was covered in. With a lot of snap and ginger to it too. It is warmer and richer in color than I figured on making it. The figure I laid in very simply (all but the head), and tomorrow I'll get after that first and bring it up level with the buildings and hills, which are rich and full in modelling and color. Then I can figure whether to knock it all down to a more Greco-like scheme of color or not. I probably will not, except for the sky, which is a bit too warm and comfortable...

Haven't I had fun since supper? Just finished *The Fountains of Rome* and Stravinsky's *Fire Bird* and Debussy, all sorts of piano records, very fine too, mostly Paderewski, and Beethoven sonatas... I've been playing for a couple of hours, I guess—a good light on the canvas at the end of the room—sort of figuring along on it the way I like to in between, often forgetting the record and having to go back and play it over, listening.

October 18. Life is so crowded, jammed full, there isn't half day enough, and I've attained a great sense of leisure. Not leisure exactly but rather a sense of long months ahead so I'm not pressed, and things unfold naturally and not helter-skelter. I've saved the onions. When I got to it this morning it was there, but without style, too finicky, and so I got out big brushes and lots of paint and laid it in really all over again, broad and simple. Also a fairly interesting change in color is significant that my senses are working. With the dull pot and green lettuce I had a vivid red tomato. Well that could be teased around and modified probably, but it is an obvious and vulgar scheme which



NEW MEXICO, 1929

persisted in bothering me. A sudden hunch told me purple was the answer, and a small avocado pear did the trick. With the green and reddish tan it's subtle and beautiful.

I have a new book today which has been a very important item for me, I believe. It's the catalog of the Collection Paul Guillaume in Paris. I saw it advertized way back and it came today as a surprise. . . The new thing is the Modigliani whom I'd thought just a mannered modernist, but I've never seen a real one. Some splendid things—a portrait of Cocteau, one of Guillaume. Then some Derains that go ahead of anything of his I've seen. A magnificent portrait of Mme. Guillaume—a serious classic job and a torso that thrills me with its broad firm modelling. Then a painter named Soutine has one called *Le Dindon*. The turkey! by my Lord it's the most terrifying thing you ever saw. Goya doesn't hold a candle to it. Wait till you see—it is appallingly sinister.

PAUL and Fred Hoen ran a small store and garage near Santa Fe, and cured the Ford of one of its chronic maladies. Both brothers appealed to Cheney as subjects to paint:

October 22. I went over for Fred, who was waiting, and we got back here and had lunch which I'd left prepared—cold meat and salad, and some potatoes and coffee hot. He was alert and interested to see what was up, I think, and astonishingly enthusiastic about some pictures. The big dahlia one got him most as he's a flower crank and means to make his business raising them. Next to that he liked the *Enfants*, sizing up the character of each feller really very closely. All this getting him easy and unembarrassed, but it didn't take much he is so simple and direct. I was watching him through lunch and landed just the idea I've had from the first, of sitting at this table in the kitchen, in quite sharp perspective, and let him read a book. That I hadn't figured at all, but it seems the thing. This is about it. [A thumb-nail sketch] Khaki shirt, very open at neck. Very tanned face neck and hands, which are big working hands. I've got an especially good job right where his left hand turns into the forearm. Table top is dark blue and back of him the white enamel refrigerator and shelves with I don't know what on them yet. Well, it's good stuff. Of course it derives from Cézanne's *Card Players*, and my whole aim will be to keep everything in harmony with the straight simple feller himself.

He won't let me pay him anything. Says if I give him dinner and go and come for him, why he figures it's one of the most interesting things he ever did and he don't want to be paid for it. Well, I guess that's all right.

I worked hard and it came along very consistently without much of any

fight. I haven't got his right shoulder and arm right... It drops more. That and the hand I'll nail tomorrow and correct on the head, though that's a damn close likeness. He's very like Henry Poor in looks. Always talks about "back east in Iowa," where he comes from.

October 23. Got going for a fine spell of work, mostly drawing the difficult right shoulder, arm, and hand. The hand is swell, and I am trying to persuade myself it isn't a little too big. It was a very consistent advance and I'm satisfied. To read Fred picked out the Thoreau *Maine Woods*. Says he's read all the others and is one of his favorite authors! So interested he posed motionless and I think forgot I was there.

October 24. The picture is going great. I spent all day again drawing, as first I found I could haul it together not by cutting down the front hand and arm, but rather by adding a whole great slice to the head and other hand. It increased the sense of volume. Now instead of painting, as I hoped, I've got to go ahead and bring the other shoulder and arm up to stuff. It's in place, but doesn't have the actual structural sense as though he could flex his arm or swing his elbow in and out. There's a sense of squareness which makes form fit character. Pretty near call the picture *Square*...

It will be hard not to start painting next shot, but I guess I'd better really put it over in structure first. It will always seem sloppy if I don't. I showed Fred the Cézanne *Card Players*, and he got the essence of it at once.

October 26. The picture went well, I think. Perhaps I went too fast. I covered it all in anyhow, getting a rich tone and good start in color for the head, but it is rather low in key. Well it holds together beautifully, and today I go after the head in detail. Will force it up into light more. I didn't lose the general likeness or character a bit... Now I have the still life to paint though. He wanted a loaf of bread on the dresser back of him and apples on the table as most characteristic of himself. I think that's interesting good taste.

October 27. The work with Fred went fine yesterday while he was here and even better all morning today when I got after the table-top, still life, etc., the sleeve of his shirt. It gets broader and simpler all the time as I correct small bits that are out of value... Tomorrow I'll get after details of modelling and likeness in the head, and the next day the hand which I've hardly touched.

October 28. I worked on his head solid and have it about set. It is back now to as good a likeness as it was in black and white. It really seems to me just about an absolute likeness. I still have the front hand and the still life stuff on the shelf behind him to settle. I had a hunch it would be fun to ask the brother and wife to drive in some night and all have supper here, and it was fun to see Fred beam at the idea and have them take it up with enthusiasm. Sometime in a couple of days when it's about done...

I wish I could show you this portrait... I do feel it's solid and thorough,



FRED, READING, 1929

and it's such a natural expression, both this and the big Saint one seem just a sort of overflow of myself, not something figured out to do. Just like a feller walking down the street and whistling a tune because he feels good. I don't want to go out for subjects. They crowd me here.

October 29. I had a good afternoon on the portrait, and am slowing up very much. I changed the still life all around twice. The figure is so established I'm not afraid of it, and it was like taking off or putting something actually on the shelf behind him. It's set now for good except to move up the handle of the ice chest! a couple of inches for balance.

November 2. I begin to have a hunch about rich color variation being reached best if you go slowly and finish as you go. Now this canvas of Fred Hoen hasn't real color at all. It has simply realized main masses and close values, but it's a tone not varied like a Cézanne with rich orchestration of color. I can still get what I'm at with this Indian still life and mean to work on it today. . . . I feel badly about the Hoen kids. The older brother called up they couldn't come to supper as his wife was sick and had gone to the hospital. . . . It is so dreary to think of—she alone in hospital and he out there, and not much of anything to go on I suppose. I think I'll ride out to see him late this afternoon or tomorrow and see if there's anything I can do. Poor kids.

Tesuque, November 7. Wish you could see Trixie and me—Trixie, essentially frivolous and tiny dog, is asleep on the sofa, I on a stool behind the counter keeping shop while Paul Hoen goes in town for a half hour with his wife in the hospital. She is getting along better, he says, but he hasn't been able to go in for a long time and see her, so I made him take this chance while I could be here. He is a swell feller, and it touches me to have him be so pleased to have me around. I painted [a landscape of the Tesuque Valley] not so very well. Too hurried, too many dozen little Mexican kids sky-larking all around me. . . . Then we sat around for a while with a very amusing string of every sort of people in the world coming in for gas—bread—deviled ham—apples—God knows what all. Then I cooked scrambled eggs and bacon and as trade let up after six we ate and had a very good time indeed. Paul opened up an awful lot about his wanderings all over the country, and his reactions in gradually getting away from first the ministry for which he was slated, and which he wanted to do till it came to the point. Then some intense social feelings, hatred and scorn of money. . . . and finally his marriage which doesn't mean much of anything to him as I could see—just a pretty girl. He is so earnest and genuine it's a real experience for me letting him talk on with a word of sensing the idea once in a while, and it's good for him. . . . He's such a true and honest feller, like Fred, but 90% more sensitive and suffering*****Sold a loaf of bread—cake— $\frac{1}{2}$ doz. eggs*****I have a loaded revolver at hand under the counter. It's a rough country!

Trixie gives little whoops. Coals drop in the stove. The goldfish blow bubbles with a deafening noise. There's a lot of colored glass in the bottom of their jar Paul says all the Indians try to buy whenever they come in. I brought out Corona and am typing a list of Spanish articles for him. Bread—pan. Butter—mantequilla. Lard—manteca, etc. Most of the trade is Mexican and they talk no English, Paul no Spanish.

Hopes his wife will be back in a couple of days now. This enamel sink and drain board, etc. were *awful* dirty and as soon as he got out of the house I went at them with fury and Dutch Cleanser, and hope he won't notice. Trixie won't. . . . When Paul's wife is around and able to keep shop some, I'm going to paint him too. It will be darn interesting to try and get the difference. He was amusing about Fred. "He's a nice boy," he said, "he's awful honest and I like him, but you have to be interested in his things—flowers, health, religious philosophy—to get much out of him." I brought the picture out to show Paul and he got a big kick out of it. Isn't it swell the different sorts of people in the world?

November 18. After supper Put and I had a *concours* of the four real ones. *Fred* easily 1st. *New Mexico* 2. *Tex Harvey* 3. *Dahlias* 4. It wasn't so much of a *concours* as a discussion of what the hell to do about it. Provided you can paint as solidly as the one of Fred, what's it all about? What kind of a world do you create, say, out of yourself? Or is it enough to do a series of good American portraits like that? And so on, and so on. Well, it's been the center of my idea, of course, for a good while, and I guess you can't solve it all at once. Just keep dissatisfied with anything that doesn't really represent something that is part of yourself. I've seen several first-rate landscape subjects, for instance, but it means nothing to go out and paint them solidly as they are. Perhaps that's the answer to this foreign land idea. If it was a New England hillside instead of a New Mexican one, it might have more meaning just for itself. That's not it though—there's a general idea back that you've got to get.

December 2. I'm going to take Fordy and drop over the hill down to Tesuque and visit with Paul Hoen. I talked over the telephone with him and he sounded sort of discouraged with his wife rather miserable again. I've figured out this scheme for painting him. [Thumb-nail indication] A sort of overall stuff jacket he wears and some kind of auto tool in his hand. It's very "primitive" of course, but seems to fit, and will make a striking contrast to the quivering sensitive quality of his face.

December 22. I got a real start with Paul—just the stark primitive feeling I want to keep, throwing all emphasis on his tragic gray eyes and rather drawn sensitive face. I really love that feller, and what nerve and courage he's got. Edith was in awful shape with her asthma, fighting to get every breath all the time I was down there. I didn't stay long and what I did came mostly out of



PAUL HOEN, 1929

my head. Today Paul has a helper with the gas, etc. and it should go easier. *December 23.* Such a full and happy day yesterday. I got along fine I think with Paul, getting his strained intensity all through, in the rather nervous twist to his shoulder and arm. His right hand on the table side of him grabbing a pliers. Edith was much better and the whole atmosphere easy and relaxed. I worked on it a couple of hours later back here and it's pretty well set to paint this morning.

December 26. Paul's picture came wonderfully. With the one painting only it is way ahead of any other head I ever did, quick and alive and a *perfect* likeness. Will probably work a lot more on it though.

December 29. I feel very happy about Paul's picture. It's really good...the most unclouded direct expression I've hit anywhere.

South Manchester, April 19, 1930, after unpacking his western canvases. I am certain this picture of Paul Hoen is my most direct achievement. My complete indifference to its technical quality is what I'll stand or fall by. It's as natural as breathing, and here's the cross-roads. Should you trust yourself and just be yourself, as this picture is, or should you consider your job a craftsman's job and be miserable because there are spots in the background and dull drawing to the fingers? At this distance the painting of that picture was as sudden as a flashlight explosion. No consideration, no careful preparation, and God damn it, it lives and breathes and this studio is a different place because it is here...

Don't think I'm a pinwheel. Showing this group of things to Knapp yesterday did it, removed me enough to suddenly see what it all meant—a direct expression of myself, painting no longer something to try, but crossed the border line *into being me*. Honestly I have laughed at paint before. I've been a Cheney scoffing Pharisee. My technical ability has carried me on its crest in spite of my native sluggishness till here I open my eyes and I'm not what I thought I was at all. It is not Isaiah's vision of a burning coal laid on my lips. It's a quiet kiss on my closed eyelids. I think I am suddenly become a man...I sure can paint.

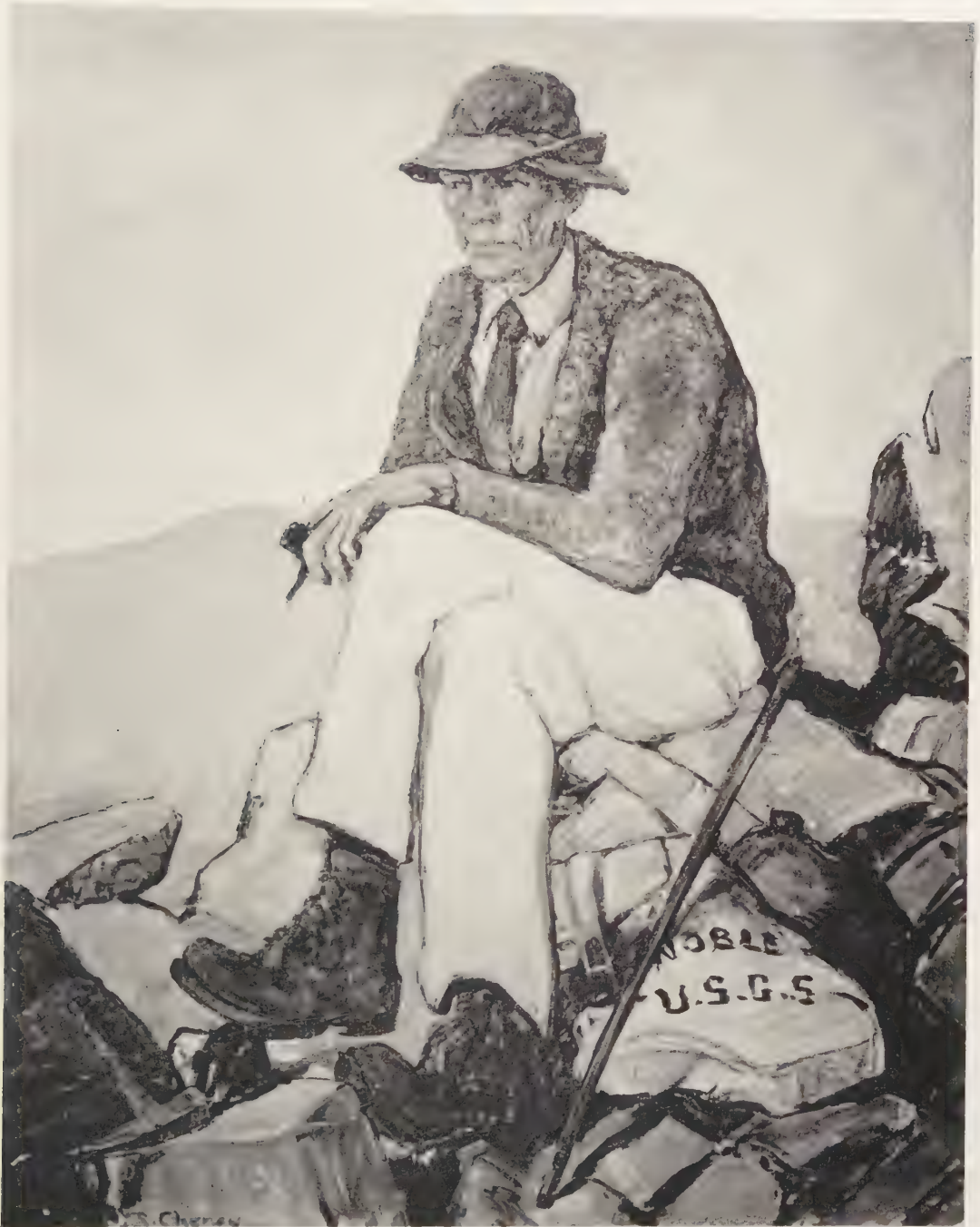
LATER that winter he had made a trip to California, which yielded a portrait of his geologist friend, Levi Noble, of Valyermo. Cheney had wanted for a long time to do this portrait, but hit upon the right arrangement only upon the spot: "I got a new hunch on the portrait from a snap-shot of Noble taken on top of a mountain, and from it worked out a wonderful interesting arrangement—rocks and sky, his geologist's kit, sharp hammer, etc. A brown hat down over his eyes which carry way to the horizon. Big canvas, 40 x 50, as I planned, only up and down."



Cheney painting at Valyermo

BY the summer of 1930 he wanted to be established again in New England, and we decided to buy together a small late eighteenth-century boat builder's house on Old Ferry Lane, Kittery. Cheney's main work that summer was a portrait of Griffin and himself, made up, as he wanted to try one, partly out of his head, with the aid of snapshots taken at Cassis six years before. While working on Griffin, he remarked: "He's a savage old feller, in spite of a friendly smile, and I want to get that in." He aimed to represent himself as deferential and listening, and in so doing lost something of his natural direct glance.

A by-product of that season was his portrait sketch of a local Irish boy, Horace Hanlon, which T. S. Eliot liked for its elimination of inessentials.



PORTRAIT OF A GEOLOGIST, 1930



TWO PAINTERS, 1930



Cheney and Griffin at the Café in Cassis



Cheney painting against the background that he introduced into his portrait with Griffin



PORTRAIT OF A BOY, 1930

FOR the winter of 1931 Cheney agreed with his doctor that it would still be foolhardy to expose his lungs to the rigors of the Maine coast, so he decided to return to Cassis. This was the last time that he was to paint in Europe. It was not altogether a success, since he caught pneumonia during a spell of stormy Mediterranean weather, and was desperately lonely in a hospital near Nice. Only with the spring did he find himself in work again.

La Bergère, Cassis, April 24, 1931. In spite of loneliness and some misery, I think this time has been of inestimable value in shearing away silly habits of accommodation to other lives. I've lived with silent forces, joy in living, terror of life and death. I want to establish my life quietly...at Kittery, and concentrate on things that mean something. My few paintings here look a little strained. The precision of them should be reached more calmly. They are better though, no doubt about that. Perhaps my careless easy-going relation to paint is gone. My picture of me and Walt surely looks as if it were done at too low a temperature. If I can't stand the pace physically, I don't know what will happen...

He had become friends with Burkhardt Melhorn, a young German journalist who had turned up in Cassis after a *Faltboot* trip down the Rhone:

April 25. I am so happy to be relaxed from that strange torture of being quite alone. I guess I've been darn near off my nut at times, quite desperate but quite unable to throw it off. Now I seem to expand and be able to talk and live quite easily in the sun.

Hearing a lot about East Prussia and ways that are so different. This feller is a solitary and very quiet guy, but a passionate sort of intelligence held down. You get glimpses of it. Talking about Sacco and Vanzetti last night, it quite swamped him with hate of the forces that killed them...His whole interest seems to be work against war, largely with laboring people. He seems to be part of a group that is working passionately for the republic...

Last night after supper we played all the *Petrouchka* records, and he talked some about Moscow where he was for some months, and Dostoevsky. I'll wait a bit before I try to paint him, I think. Hard to know what to do about 6 ft. 2 on canvas. Even if you only do a head, you must give that impression somehow.

April 28. Melhorn promises to let me start a portrait of him tomorrow. Blue jersey, white eyebrows, deep tan face and blue eyes. It will be a stark rather angular picture, if I hit it right. Could send it out labelled *Honesty*, but such a penetrating look and subtle sort of slightly cynical twist to the mouth that is too obvious a word.

April 29. I had such a good morning starting the portrait. Spent a good long time figuring it out. I knew ahead I wanted it as stark and direct as I could get

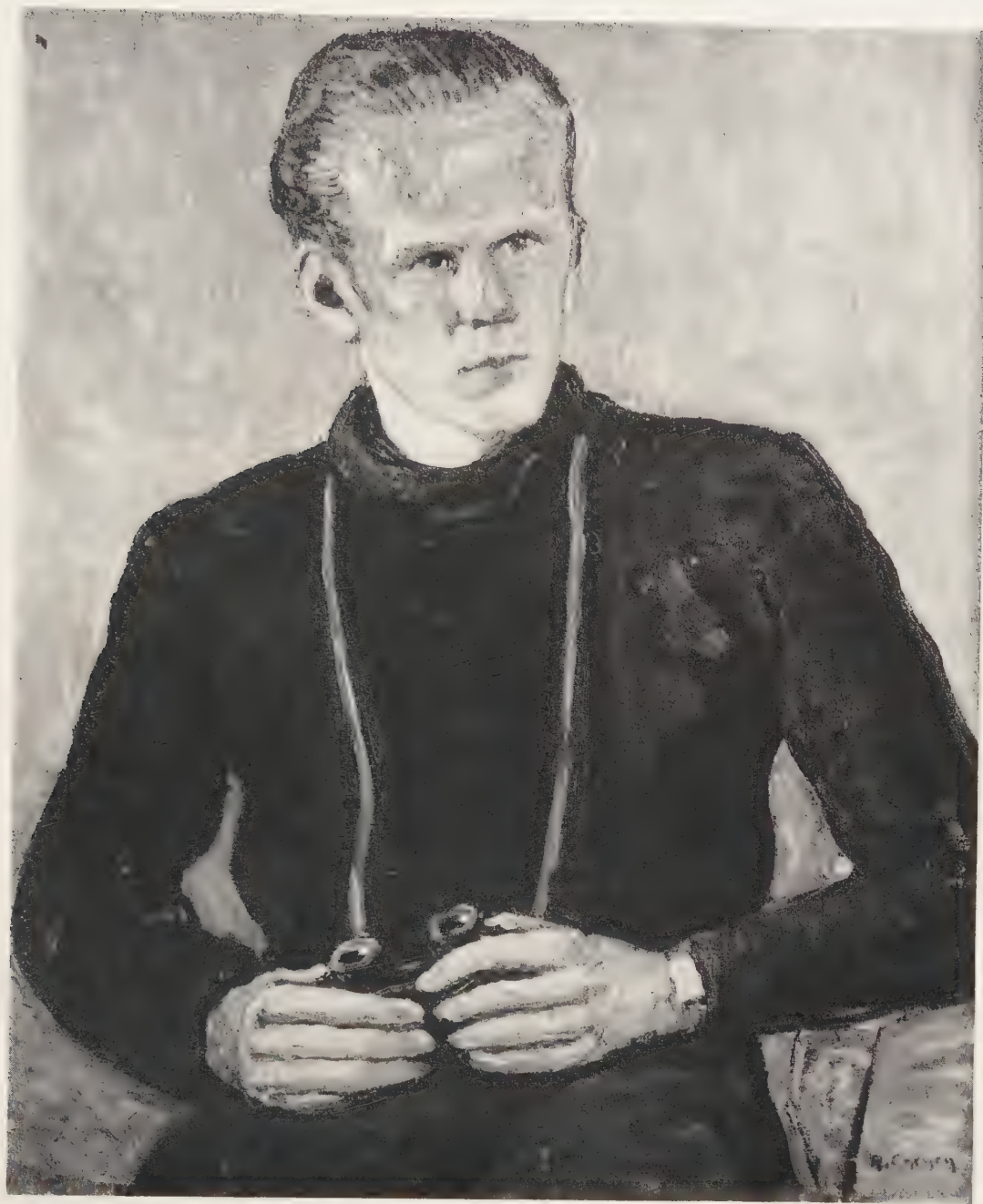
it. Blue jersey, with a pair of binoculars, sort of told the story of his long solitary trips all about in his small boat. The cold blue background of the studio wall concentrates everything in the rich-colored head, and hands holding the glasses firmly . . . very slightly lifted from his lap. It's full of animation and, I think, *just* the character. Drawing all done except some detail of hands I'd better leave to paint. So tomorrow is as critical as today. Only I do feel perfectly satisfied with it as a start. I want desperately to stick as close to essentials as I have today—nothing in it that I don't mean, no careless stroke. I guess that is the answer I have been searching so blindly. These quiet peaceful days have given it to me . . . A sort of victory over past trouble. Joy that hasn't known suffering isn't much.



April 30. A grand start this morning on the portrait. I pitched it way up into the high blond color I wanted, with pale blue wall almost the quality of an outdoor sky. Well, it sure is a knock-down portrait already. I worked as broadly and simply as I could, just laying out the planes, with my mind more on color than anything. God knows what has happened to me to make me paint so . . . but I sure have got this feller down, even if I did nothing else to the head. Now the dark blue jersey and the hands cutting sharp against it—I think I'll do that tomorrow before I touch the head again.

May 1. I got the whole figure and background laid in, keeping up the speed all right. Tomorrow it's the two hands and the glasses, and a fourth day for the whole again should finish.

May 3. The whole day quiet here to work out a lot of things about the picture . . . Changed and richened the whole background and am working out the drawing of the hands. It is certainly No. 1 picture for me now. *Wild Tulips* next. The other portrait and still life look a bit hesitant. Perhaps that will prove to be their good quality later on. I should finish *Melhorn* tomorrow, with



BURKHARDT MELHORN, 1931

one good sitting to check up things. Rather think of a still life of horse-chestnut leaves and blossoms.

May 4. I more or less marked time on the portrait this morning. It was a mistake to try and work with him posing again perhaps, as I have it pitched way up beyond the reality, and I find it better to work out of my head. Fact is it's about all done, and now a question of waiting till I see what things begin to bother me later.

May 5. Instead of starting a still life I kept on the portrait, getting him to pose again and really carrying it along quite a lot. It hasn't the fine sensitive quality of the feller, but has all the energy. Holbein would be the man to get the combination. As painting it speaks for itself. As character it lacks subtlety, is too "boche."

May 6. *Wild Tulips* got backed right off the map to third place this morning. I got after my *Horse-Chestnut Leaves and Blossoms*, and it went like wildfire, going right up ahead of the portrait for simplicity and style. Slightly cold in tone, but very rich and sustained, and *thoroughly* drawn. Melhorn leaves tomorrow, and I will go in to Marseilles with him as I promised to spend the night with his friends on the sailboat.

May 12. As I write that date, I realize for the first time it is the cherished intimate day of my Mother's birthday, and without knowing it, I have been celebrating it with one of the very happiest mornings of my whole life. A broad statement, but quite true. I was up early and Desdemona [the cat] and I had coffee in the sun. I had actually to pull her out of her chair all rolled up in a tight ball, whereas I had splashed all over in a cold tub. I took to breakfast with me the Grierson collection of Donne, etc. Read first *The Ecstasy*, then more, then the whole introduction, feeling a tingling sense of excitement and getting at it all for the first time. I seemed able to hold Donne's rhythm over the unfamiliarity of word and thought, and make them all a whole. Desdemona rolled in the sun, darted after a bit of paper, over and over. Up in my lap and out again. The poor creature is just learning to play for the first time, and I leave her!

The undercurrent all morning was my portrait of Burkhardt, propped up at the end of the terrace and giving me an incredible sense of confidence in myself, because it lives and breathes, no doubt about it. It is organized, that's what does it—the color right emotionally or psychologically or whatever it is for the subject, the pose him, the spacing right.

It is already lunch time, and I have been here all the long morning, and when I say it's been so happy I mean I've been so vividly alive all over—sparking just right. If I'm going to paint, it must be at this tension. It's what has made these few things good—a cleaning away of some hellish indifference or complaisance.



HORSE-CHESTNUT BLOSSOMS, 1931

Kittery, the following November 2. Dear Put—How's things? I'm fine—real fine. A streak of to hell with everything—just paint. Turned out a whole raft of little landscapes, hard and brilliant and literal with a difference. Good, I think, for what they are. None of them pictures, but tiny-Christ-behind-the-key-hole peeks through at the array of larger things, which should be pictures. And I hear a sound usually sublimated in the best society, and throwing open the door I suddenly find there is very little there, that in fact the only really good ones are those done at Cassis in the one moment of liberation and relaxation from miseries which accompanied the delightful ten days Melhorn was with me at La Bergère. They are good, better than the *Lilies and Salute*, at least two are, because far more completely realized. Equally single in conception. Christ, it comes down to that—your intensity at the moment of conception, and cruelty in eliminating any but the main ideas after. I just ruined a start I had with swell drawing of the ugly yellow house and barn next door, because I got all led away with the lovely hazy autumn sunshine which turned the lemon yellow clapboards every ineffable daffodil when they had to stay yellow clapboards. . .

Cheney, let your garden and your cousins and your aunts go, and see if for once you can't come across. It's so slight, the difference, and I made the grade once, in *Horse-Chestnuts*. A real stylish thing which asks nothing from nobody. In fact, an icicle—like me, you know. . . I hope it's not necessary to be miserable to paint well, because I am so confoundedly happy and healthy. . . Foster gave me a magnificent party to see me by 50. His best form as host, and Chablis and Pommard. . . Yours, like a Green Bay Tree.

Cheney kept in touch with Melhorn, who lived up to his strong anti-Nazi convictions and left Germany for France as soon as Hitler came to power. He became a French citizen, married a French wife, and supported himself by teaching German in a night-school in Bordeaux. After the outbreak of the war Cheney was naturally anxious about what might have happened to him. A letter arrived in Kittery a short time after Cheney's death: "Cassis, July 10, 1945. Cher vieil ami, Penses-tu encore parfois à ton compagnon de temps jadis à La Bergère? Que deviens-tu? Que fait la peinture et ta collection d'art chinois? La gloire definitive est-elle venue couronner ton front de lauriers eternels, ou es-tu toujours le charmant out-sider dans un monde d'horreurs? . . . Après bien de jeux du hasard et de la mort pour échapper aux bandes qui occupaient notre douce France, j'ai pu revenir dans mon cher Cassis. . . Au tournant du chemin, je te vois toujours peindre les amandiers en fleurs, ce jour lumineux de printemps. . ."



*Working on the Portsmouth Waterfront
in summer*

FOR the last fifteen years of Cheney's life Kittery was his real home. He felt that he had found his place, with his feet solidly planted on New England soil, and with the right mixture of society and solitude. He had a local carpenter build him a studio in the same simple clap-boarded style as the house, and he was very productive there throughout the nineteen thirties. He often voiced a deep satisfaction. One spring evening in 1932 when he had gone down to see if the dory, which he had put in to soak, was all right, he "sat there a long while with the tide swishing and swirling and gurgling, and the moon so bright and light on the house, and pear blossoms—a wonderfully rich and poignant moment somehow. The sense of really belonging, of being fused with the surroundings and part of it, a sort of wide peace. Not exactly justified by the day's work because that had more garden and wandering about than solid

painting, but that will come. I can't be as rich and full of life as I have been these last days and not find it will produce some tangible result besides the happy sense of ordered dignity."

Sometimes he "didn't want to paint at all or look at paint. A sudden... completion of a need to get fully in touch with things around the house, the place. Have lately had some sense of drive, of not living but waiting to live, and felt like hauling a long breath and just being." In other moods, feeling that he was dissipating his time too much, he reflected on the "strange instinct to want to organize everything that comes in contact with you. House, garden, people. A bit further it's landscape, grouping of flowers and so on, and becomes a painting. Unfortunately I haven't the same gift for organizing myself, my ideas, my appetites, my habits of indolence. If I were as trim as my border bed—wouldn't I be a lousy painter!"

He spent much of his time covering the immediate locality by Ford, stopping for long intervals to study out the land, and to decide what he wanted to paint. "Such a swell day, possibly one of the most fruitful... as I've hit on two subjects which seem to have, both of them, the intangible quality of broad classic style that I liked in the *Melhorn* and *Horse-Chestnut* pictures. A wide

generous pattern that is what satisfies you in Giotto and Vermeer. I will modify that of course to say such an arrangement is hinted at—felt—but it is certainly the one grand quality we want in a work of art. This morning was a variant of the *Frisbee's Wharf* subject. . . It looks to me now as though this one, same size of panel as the other new ones, was the best thing of this summer—so far. Then after lunch and a rather lazy hour with Pretzel out in the sun on the lawn, I stretched a new canvas and went off on the trail of the 'Vermeer' subject [i.e. the houses on the Portsmouth Waterfront, which also form the background in his portrait of Howard Lathrop]. I didn't really paint. I *planned* carefully. Made an accurate drawing just as it is first. Then simplified, modified, stylized it all. Then the sky was good about five, so I sailed in with big brushes and laid that in tentatively, and I have an idea it's what a kid in Portsmouth called my one of the Old Church—'the Cat's Pajamas.' . . . Anyhow this particular Ford never sparked better than today."

He worked most often in the streets of Portsmouth, or in the villages of Kittery and Newcastle. Shy at first at being conspicuous, he became a very familiar and accepted figure. He sensed the response of his audience when painting in front of the fire-engine house: "a perilously sceptical attitude fortunately changed to a 'nice work that' tone." Or again, on one of his many occasions of working down by the railroad station: "It was warm and quiet—except for a surging crowd of 20 or so, taxi-drivers, railroad men in blue jumpers, quids and good cracks, sailors, kids. . . Well, my drawing was clear and sharp from the beginning, so I was popular. One burly hard guy in overalls swaggered over, spit, said nothing. Then, 'Well I'll say he ain't no amateur.' Swaggered off. That was nice. I liked it." He also liked it when a Portsmouth hardware store wanted to hang his portrait of a local hunter in their show window, and when the fuel company displayed his canvas of their coal yard and dock. When Paul's Market opened a new shop, Cheney painted a still life of a red hen and vegetables, and gave it to Mr. Paul, who hung it proudly over the counter.

Cheney had less occasion now to write detailed accounts of his work in progress, since I had moved from New Haven to Cambridge and spent my week-ends at Kittery, and since he was also in closer proximity to Putnam and other friends. The conception of painting which he had been developing during the previous decade continued to solidify. As he expressed it after reading a book on Sienese art, "Giotto was more *painter* than Duccio, a mystic. They [the Florentines] are always more painters, if the highest reach of painting is creating a self-contained balanced organization which then lives of itself. Painting is not a handmaid of religious or literary expression. It has to do with form and color and attains harmony only when it is whole. That's where Cézanne is with his peers, why these are heroic days."

He wrote to the Ferargil Gallery in 1936, in connection with his exhibition there: "I feel the new work has been pitched up into the light better after some months of work in dazzling New Mexico. I had an interesting experience some years ago working in the south of France along with my friend Walter Griffin. He forced me up into a very high key of values, no darks anywhere, and the experience of those two years I think trained my eye necessarily on a very close adjustment of values. That's what interests me—lighted surfaces—probably color for itself too much neglected in the search for that held surface. The reaction from those high values with its thinness of feeling sent me down to too low a key, such as the picture of *Kittery Point*, shown at the Chicago World's Fair. . . Now the West has given me a lift back into the light, but I am sure with richness the earlier French and Italian ones didn't have.

"I am puzzled by our liking for the thing we aren't. I like Ingres. In days when you could make any money, I spent all I could get mostly for white Chinese porcelain—perfection—and yet I'm so damn impetuous, it looks as though I painted with my feet. . . The urge to do it is much stronger than any calculated will. There is a certain commanding division of space, the right volume, and it's been curious to be shown in the next gallery to Ryder as that was his great quality. Vermeer had it in his best, which is why he was the great Dutch painter.

"I am fortunate in having found the right place for me to paint and to forget the urge to be somewhere else. What was the insult hurled by the local paper? I came here as a 'summer person,' but evidently the niche fitted. Certainly I feel now that I am fixed here for life and any work I do in other places will be more in the way of a change and tonic."

He painted the countryside from Crockett's Neck to Spruce Creek under many guises and in all seasons, but the onset of winter exhilarated him most. He said, "Make hay while the snow lasts," and in *Water Front*, one of his earliest winter canvases in the region, he demonstrated what he meant. When he was dissatisfied with one of his summer renderings of a scene, he had the habit of taking the canvas and rehandling it under snow, as in the case of his massive *Bow Street*. This picture is also characteristic of his choice of subjects. He never painted the sea by itself, and rarely a landscape without houses. The architectural subject attracted him most, and called out the full energy of his drawing. He also did several portraits of local people, best represented by the one of his friend the Portsmouth fisherman, Howard Lathrop.

Cheney's style from now on did not vary so much by periods as by subjects or by where he was working. He always responded immediately to the place he was at, as during a few weeks in Santa Barbara in 1933, when he finally crystallized what he had never quite expressed there before. In his treatment of a *Mexican Jar* standing in the garden among blue cinerarias, he felt that he



Cheney, the Kittery resident

had “got some modelling like sculpture into it.” He had painted the Santa Barbara Mission on several previous occasions, but now he was determined not to let “the subject-matter intrude too much” and become “picturesque.” A few days later he wrote: “I finished my *Mission* picture. It is powerful and really planned, felt as design and balance of color and form. These last things here have something new. I don’t just put my finger on why they have the authority they have. I seem myself more directed behind them, that force which is me expressed more directly.”

His treatment of New England tended to divide into the contrasting

veins he had already struck in *Elrida's Swing* and *Depot Square*. In *New Hampshire Barns*, observed on a summer's day in the rich farming country toward Exeter, he was concerned with the solid "warmth of material beneath surface values." In *Portsmouth Factory* he caught the grimness that he often felt during the depression years. He was still of many moods about his work, complacency being about the only one he did not know: "Such an odd moment just now. Been sitting by the fire, house all glowing and warmed with the fire, with vivid living since dinner, with lamp-light on a cyclamen, with my nearly finished portrait under the lamp in the next room—and I steps out the sea door to look round and see the night, steps into dim orange light from the window on fresh snow, and by jinks the world is aflood with moonlight mixed with orange from inside quickly giving way to the real article, still and too piercingly beautiful to be borne. Shadows of twigs on snow-forms of goldenrod or asters black on white, and the edge where the snow came against the water—it's seeing those places just where one thing gives to the next that makes seeing too exquisite a torture to stand sometimes. Maybe you get it by one word with another, or what makes you beat it back to known lamp-light and glass of milk and pull the kitten's tail? Said portrait has me going today—one I did and bitched last year and today have unbitched quite... Been very low a couple of days due to fall from excitement over a big canvas last week—very complicated job of feller from greenhouse here with all sorts of plants and view out the window and what-not. Well, I landed some pretty solid form but it don't bear close inspection... so I was miserable... And then I happen on a little good work on my own mug and now Valoroso is a Man again. It is an awkward way I paint—torn out rather than laid down."

He would hit a streak of "quick lively work," and then question whether he should not be more deliberate and paint slower. He was most nearly content when "balanced form, design and color" were "all carried on together better." After noting that he still worked with something like his old *Ute Pass* speed of manner even in a complex design like *Hauled Up*, he concluded: "I paint so damn much better and I hit so much closer to the rhythm of my life that these things are full and warm. Those [earlier ones] hinted precocious virtuosity. These seem full-blooded expressions of emotion as well by handling paint right to fit as by seeing right to start."

He made his mature approach more explicit when he said, after doing the Sewall House again: "Today I painted just the way I want to paint. I think it is damn good. The white house by the York Bridge from the river side, the great elms arching over it, tawny yellow, a vivid maple out behind. The reason I like it is the way I chose the essential elements, both design, color and 'story,' and, entirely eliminating everything else, stuck to those few essentials. The very starkness gives as it should space and repose, and the sunshine is

golden and mellow as it was today.” *Meeting House Hill* and *Point o’ Graves*, especially the latter, are instances of what Cheney meant by elimination. In *Nubble Light* and *Ogunquit Fishing Shacks* he caught the starkness of the country reduced to its essential form after the leaves and the other summer visitors were all gone.

He generally held that color was his chief weakness and that he established his form primarily by tone. Yet “even the simplest act of seeing” was a constantly fresh joy, even a glimpse “of the bathroom cupboard blue-green against the red floor yesterday amounted to a major experience. I could make a real picture of it. . . . The air is full of the sea, the sun hazy and warm, and how I enjoy the full range of my senses and thoughts.” Or again, after spending “a riotous half hour” with his friend the Oriental art dealer, Nathan Benz: “He showed me some . . . jades and porcelains. My God, feller, what passionately beautiful things! A new color in my world really—varied chinese ‘yellow’—a warmth under a cooler surface. Hardly yellow, you would say brown, and then a warmth would steal over your vitals somewhere and you would realize it was pure yellow, but so God damn discreet you had to lift veils before you knew it, your soul of a stature to know it was yellow and not brown. This is not persiflage, it’s accurate statement.”

From the Studio Window, which silhouetted once again flowers against the sea, revealed some of his most subtle handling of color. By offsetting white cinerarias against the milky surface of the water and against the gray-white sky, he indicated what he meant by telling Putnam that “flake white is the basis of painting.” It was certainly the paint by which he established some of his most glowing and delicate effects. *The Studio from the Porch* was yet another combination of landscape and still life, one in which he was pleased by the spacious suggestion of fresh summer air.



FRISBEE'S WHARF, 1931



WATER FRONT, 1932



MEXICAN JAR, 1933



SANTA BARBARA MISSION, 1933



NEW HAMPSHIRE BARNS, 1934



PORTSMOUTH FACTORY, 1935



HOWARD LATHROP, 1937



HAULED UP, 1937



POINT O' GRAVES, 1938



FROM THE STUDIO WINDOW, 1938



BOW STREET, 1938



MEETING HOUSE HILL, 1940



NUBBLE LIGHT, 1940



OGUNQUIT FISHING SHACKS, 1940



THE STUDIO FROM THE PORCH, 1941

CHENEY wrote gaily once about having “a plethora of vitality,” and his animation and exuberance kept him seeming far younger than his actual years. But at the beginning of the nineteen-forties he suddenly began to have bad spells of asthma. These created a serious problem for him, since they were worse near the sea, and he did not want to uproot himself again. The attacks also left him nervously strained and caused him to have increasing trouble with drink. He had finally to accept that he could not stand any more New England winters, and in 1943 he made the first of three visits to the ranch owned by his brother-in-law, General Halstead Dorey, near San Antonio, Texas. The work he did there struck a new vein in stylized still lifes. He had always had a fondness for introducing comic objects into his compositions, grotesque figurines or Indian Katchinas or wooden parrots, and now, concentrating his somewhat reduced energy, he devised a whole series of fanciful effects.

The spirit in which he adapted himself to his new environment is suggested by a letter not long after his arrival: “What a lovely morning I’ve had out by the cattle-guard going on with my oak trees. A soft gray day, the air and trees just alive with every sort of little bird, I suppose on their way some-

where. Anyhow St. Francis would have had a hard time to do any work with all his getting caught up on where they had been and where they were going. The flock of sheep too seemed to realize it was a day for sociability, and came one by one to plank down just where I wanted them and watch me, chewing solidly. They didn’t seem fat and greasy citizens, more bits of earth come just alive enough to move about and chew their cuds. Added to that dozens of white and black hens picking about under my feet. All of them making lovely soul-curing company. The peace is sinking in, and I find myself more at rest every day.” He made brief notations about all his new work:



Cheney helping Ramon catch the goats

January 29, 1943. Very snug after a real good day’s work behind me—a very complicated job, 23 x 28, geranium pots on the stone edge of the fountain against a swell green pottery jug. A

vivid green frog—Chinois—about six inches long, ready to hop in. Iris leaves, etc. . . .

Yesterday produced a chance job of a white caribou, with a small white Chinois riding him and playing a flute, walking along over a mirror with greens and a couple of yellow gourds. It's very entertaining, if not very finished.

February 20. A fantastic silver bird on a gray rock among cactus plants looks off through a silvery gray sky, silent upon a peak in Darien. A small sheep skull down in the right corner. It has lots of style.

The second time he was there he experimented with some animal pictures: *December 19, 1943, with a thumb-nail sketch of The Goats.* This is quite a departure and has been great fun, if incredibly difficult to paint and not just draw. I got the idea from a kodak from last year. Liquid green shadows with bright stripe of sunshine across the grass. The goats all white. A hint I suppose from the little Herby Meyer the Barbers have plus Piero della Francesca! The difficulty was holding a broad view of the whole on such a tiny scale (8 x 10), but I think I have it held really well. It is the best thing so far [this year].

January 4, 1944. Today has been very rainy and dark, though warm. . . . I worked indoors by the window on the little goat picture, which I can't just satisfy myself with. It's very ticklish work, upsets so easily on that small scale. But each time I work on it, it seems to feel better. I want to really get it.

January 8. Here's something quite different than I ever tried before. Got the idea from a small half-tone in the San Antonio paper a couple of Sundays ago—three yellow and white calves and a very black cow with white spots. The little ones very leggy and wobbly. They cut in sharp silhouette against the very dark ground. The fence dark against a late evening sky. Sort of George Bellows painting an Arthur B. Davies subject. Have been at it hard through two rainy days. Some spots, especially the left hand calf and Mamma are knock out, and I hope I can bring the rest up to that tomorrow. It's propped against the door in my room where I always have the new picture evenings to look over and get ideas. Just now this and the little goat one and the loquat leaves are here in the light, and they certainly stand up with any work I ever did.

The next winter he started out at Santa Fe, but got very sick from drinking. In one relaxed spell he wrote: "Here's a hint of the 'great opus' has had me on the jump the last three days—*The Lost Cause*. Stems from a very militant warrior and horse I borrowed from Willard Hougland. The horse is not as rubbery and pulled out lengthwise as in this sketch. It's been very exciting.

I never reached an equal intensity in anything I've done before. It's so hard for me to stick to a high pitch like that I near vomited once or twice. It looks just silly here, but it has something. Hougland and another neighbor dropped in last night and I could tell by the way it hit them between the eyes I had something that tells."

He returned to Texas to recuperate, and hauled himself back to painting by another series of still lifes. Of one of these he wrote: "Delightfully artificial, reflected in the same round table-mirror that was in the *Caribou* picture last year. He is here again, playing to a Prince on the march. . . . The creature the Prince rides is vivid green, the dogs (?) have splashes of vermilion with very perky tails. A real orgy of frivolity and I think some really lively color. It's been a nice interlude but I guess I'd better get back to some solider material." Since the reflecting mirror looked like water, Cheney called this one *Ebb-Tide*.

He also did at this time the stylized sketch of *Loquat Leaves and Fruit* on the title-page of this record: "A nice variety of greens. A simple gray background, some hints of bronze and blue in the back leaves for contrast with the strong greens in front." While working on a larger still life he reflected: "As often, when a thing is going well, I'm astonished next morning when I get back to the 'motif,' as the master called it, to find the painting much more *real* than the subject. It takes on an organized life of its own different from the material objects and makes them seem sort of episodic."

Early in May he wrote: "When the moon is full again I'll be seeing it across Piscataqua waters with a green light and good smells of salt water." That was the scene his eyes closed upon last. In spite of a bad attack of asthma he still enjoyed the late glow of a July evening with the occasional quiet comment that made life in his presence more vivid than it ever was for any of his friends alone. He was knocked unconscious during the night by a thrombosis, and died early the next morning. A copy of Sainte-Beuve's *Causeries* was on his bed.



TEXAS POOL, 1943



CARIBOU, 1943



PHILIPPINE FANTASY, 1943



THE GOATS, 1944



THE CALVES, 1844



THE LOST CAUSE, 1944

[illegible]

1/14/03 IL

Russell Cheney, 1881-1945



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